

SUZANNE LOFTUS



**INSECURITY
& THE RISE OF
NATIONALISM IN
PUTIN'S**

RUSSIA

KEEPER OF TRADITIONAL VALUES



Insecurity & the Rise of Nationalism in Putin's Russia

Suzanne Loftus

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Keeper of Traditional Values

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, and Organization of the Study

INTRODUCTION

During Russian President Vladimir Putin's current term (2012–2018), the Russian regime has become increasingly authoritarian with heightened media control and reduced civil rights and political liberties, according to Freedom House, a leading agency on freedom in the world (Freedom House 2017). It has also adopted an increasingly aggressive and nationalist foreign policy both in the near and far abroad through its actions such as annexing Crimea, invading eastern Ukraine, and involving itself in a military incursion in Syria. In addition, the economic situation and living standards in Russia have deteriorated following the 2014 fall in the price of oil and the imposition of Western economic sanctions on Russia after its annexation of Crimea (*The Economist* 2014). Yet, the majority of Russians in 2017 continued to register historically high approval ratings for their leader despite many having rebelled against him in 2011–2012 during the parliamentary and presidential elections.¹ In the face of increasing restrictions on freedom, domestic economic instability and a new, active foreign policy that has arguably broken

¹Tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets to rebel against what they considered an unfair and unfree election ridden with fraudulent votes and lack of legitimacy both in the parliamentary elections in 2011 and the presidential elections of 2012 (*The Guardian* 2011).

international law, what factors explain Putin's increased and *sustainably* high approval ratings?

This study examines both the domestic and foreign policy elements of Putin's time in office that provide explanations for his popularity today and throughout his tenure. It also examines domestic and foreign policy during Yeltsin's time in office to present a juxtaposition between the two leaders. There are several potential explanations for Putin's continued 89% favorability ratings in 2017 (Levada Center, 2017). One possible explanation could be that instability in Russia in the 1990s left Russians with a fear of change and a desire for a strongman ruler to provide them with greater security and stability despite any accompanied civil and political rights abuses. A second explanation could be that Putin has been effective at appealing to Russian aspirations of returning to the great power status Russia once had, challenging the US and NATO and affirming its role in international relations. A third explanation points to Putin's "amazing ingenuity in adapting to changing conditions, and a strong desire to stay in power at any cost" (Volkov 2014). Putin uses extraordinary measures to pump up his ratings such as wars and external threats when the economy or other factors threaten to drive them down; in other words, he uses methods to distract and deter the population of Russia from any economic woes they may be experiencing. Though this latter explanation may work to explain short-term bursts of approval ratings, this study seeks to explain Putin's sharp increase in popularity and the sustainability of that increase. A fourth possibility is that Russia has successfully adapted its foreign policy actions to a changing world and strategically responds to the actions of other states in the international realm and the world's geopolitical dynamics to the liking of the Russian population. These interests have shifted over time from "Great Power Balancing" to "Pragmatic Cooperation" to "Great Power Assertiveness" to "Russia's New Vision for Modernization" and finally to "Russia's Civilizationist Turn" (Tsygankov 2016). A combination of these reasons may also provide the best overall explanation. This study seeks to determine which of these explanations possess the greatest explanatory power in analyzing Putin's popularity and adds the element of the importance of national identity to the discussion. Through the framework of Social Identity Theory in Social Psychology and the use of "social creativity" as a current identity management strategy (Tajfel and Turner 1979), this study argues that Putin has consolidated a specific national identity that

possesses both domestic and international features based on conservatism and sovereignty which represents an opposition to Western values and has allowed Russia to regain positive national self-esteem and re-establish itself as an important international actor.

The main argument is that domestically, Putin represents the father of stability and a proud leader of Russia's cultural distinctiveness. He has created a safer, more orderly, more stable society through an effective and pragmatic centralization of power, run by a historically traditional authoritarian figure. He has emphasized Russia's unique identity and unique developmental needs and implemented a specific form of democracy that adheres to those needs and traditional mindset called a "sovereign democracy." Internationally, Putin is the restorer of Russia's "Great Power Status" through his bold moves in Ukraine and Syria and through his challenging of the status quo. He has emphasized the importance of conservatism and national sovereignty and has adopted the role of the leader of the anti-Western world. Putin has achieved a symbolic power as the "Keeper of traditional values" and portrays Russia's conservative, Eurasian and Civilizationist identity as being superior to the West, whose identity he describes as materialist, individualist, imperialist, hypocritical, and possessing a lax sense of self and morality. Both his actions and rhetoric have consolidated a strong and unified sense of national identity and purpose, which has led to a restoration of national pride not seen after the fall of the USSR and therefore a positive national self-esteem.

The analysis presented here draws on elements of International Relations theory and Comparative Politics. While the primary identity-based argument relies on Realist and Constructivist theories in International Relations to explain the importance of order and the social contract and Russia's historical trajectory prior to its present identity consolidation and current identity management strategies, it is also useful to use theories within Comparative Politics to define the nature of the Russian regime, its development path, how it sustains itself, and what implications this has for similar regimes and the development of democracy. These theories will help explain the roots of Putin's increased and continuing popularity on both the domestic and international sides of the equation and will support the evidence found in the data collected to form a sound and coherent argument that not only has implications for Russia, but for the development of similar countries as well as for the future of the world order.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary theoretical framework used to argue the main points of this study is derived from Realist and Constructivist theories in International Relations. Realism prioritizes the nation state and its self-interest in international relations. It also prioritizes security and relative power. Realists have claimed that this tradition of thought is evident within the history of political thought dating back to antiquity, through the works of Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes, Kautilya, and Niccolò Machiavelli. This study derives its Realist argument from Thomas Hobbes and the idea of the “social contract” (Hobbes 1904) and is applied to Russian domestic politics. Constructivism describes the dynamic, contingent, and culturally based condition of the social world (Adler 2016). Constructivist theories emphasize the role of knowledge and of knowledgeable agents in the constitution of social reality. It is a social theory that should be understood as taking intersubjectivity and social context into consideration and the co-constitution of agent and structure. In International Relations, Constructivism has led to new and important questions about the role of identities, norms, causal understandings, and power in the constitution of national interests, institutionalization, international governance, and about the social construction of new territorial and non-territorial transnational regions. Some well-known Constructivist scholars include Tim Dunne, Peter Katzenstein, Friedrich Kratochwil, Nicholas Onuf, and John Ruggie. Constructivist theories are used in this study not only to analyze Russia’s national identity but also the reasons for adopting its particular foreign policy.

Regime theories in Comparative Politics are also used within this study’s theoretical framework to describe the nature of the Russian regime and to better understand how a Constructivist argument contributes to the existing theories on hybrid and autocratic regime sustainability. The regime theories emphasize the difficulties that certain nations faced while democratizing and underline that instead of reaching democratic consolidation, they have mostly remained in a ‘hybrid’ zone between authoritarianism and democracy (Schedler 2002; Ottaway 2003; Levitsky and Way 2010). The autocratic sustainability theories provide explanations for the endurance of non-democratic regimes upon which this study builds and incorporates the importance of imposing order and stability, as well as the maintenance of a positive national self-esteem in times of threat.

Order and Security and State Centralization

Within Realism, the strengthening of the state is seen as the basic foundation of social order (Hobbes 1904). “Social contract” arguments typically posit that individuals have consented, either explicitly or tacitly, to surrender some of their freedoms and submit to the authority of the ruler in exchange for protection of their remaining rights. It is important to consider that there may be prior needs to be fulfilled before a society can enjoy or even desire liberty. It does not much matter whether threats to security come from within or outside one’s own nation. A victim is just as dead if the bullet that kills him is fired by a neighbor attempting to seize his property as if it comes from an invading army. A citizen looks to the state, therefore, for protection against both types of threats. Security is an absolute value. In exchange for providing it, the state can rightfully ask anything from a citizen save that he sacrifice his own life, for preservation of life is the essence of security.

In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes states that without security:

There is no place for Industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth, no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Times; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. (Hobbes 1904, p. 84)

This study emphasizes the establishment of order and security that Putin provided in Russian society through state centralization and argues this as a major explanation for his popularity. As part of Putin’s centralization project, the “institutionalization of corruption” and the “vertical integration of criminals” permitted Putin’s direct control over organized crime groups, which further contributed to Russia’s increased levels of safety. As Mark Galeotti explains, in the 1990s after the Soviet Union collapsed, organized crime exploded and became stronger than the state itself. This was one of the main reasons why the people and the elite craved a strong leader who could rebuild the authority of the state and restore stability. Russia became a lot safer after Putin, and this was partly due to certain settlements that were reached with organized crime groups. These agreements included not

challenging the state or causing chaos in exchange for immunity and following state orders and requests or else face serious consequences (Galeotti 2016). In other words, the corruption that exists in Russia between the elite and organized crime groups has managed to provide more order to the society, despite the controversial manners in which it is being achieved.

The order in the society and the stability of the regime also lie within the fact that the elite in Russia are united and cohesive under Putin due to similar “network” ties and agreements. The Russian regime has been described as a “network” state. In other words, the country appears to be run by interest groups and less formal interactions. The members of the network usually possess high ranking positions within the state apparatus. These networks historically permeated all of Russian politics but today rather shape the relations between the center and the periphery and therefore cut across bureaucratic structures and institutions. Therefore, the Russian state’s national interests are formed by the interests of these private actors (Kononenko 2011).

Karen Dawisha has categorized Russia as a “Kleptocracy.” In other words, Putin transformed an oligarchy independent of and more powerful than the state into a corporatist structure in which oligarchs served at the pleasure of state officials, who themselves gained and exercised economic control both for the state and for themselves. The result is that 110 individuals control 35% of Russia’s wealth. Dawisha states that Putin’s advance to power was not accidental but premeditated by Putin and a group of his followers. He built a system based on massive predation on a level not seen in Russia since the tsars. The oligarchs in Russia have become billionaires and are able to maintain that wealth so long as they do not challenge Putin’s power and bolster the centralized power of the state. In a pluralistic state, the abuse of power of Putin and his associates would bring down the government, but in Russia, this has little effect (Dawisha 2014). Although Dawisha deeply criticizes the regime, this study argues that this structural description of the regime helps to explain its sustainability as it provides a certain form of stability.

Russia in the 1990s suffered high levels of instability due to its lack of a strong governing power in the midst of its transition from authoritarianism. As Samuel Huntington stated, modernization breeds instability while modernity breeds stability (Huntington 1968). In order to transition from one to the other, it is important to have an effective governing body to establish order. Though Russia had already undergone

periods of modernization, the 1990s was a period of further modernization as the country transitioned from a communist system to a capitalist system and experienced *glasnost* and *perestroika*, or opening and reform. Unlike during the chaotic 1990s under Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin exhibited governmental effectiveness to ensure this process happened smoothly through his centralization project and the rapid economic growth that Russia experienced in the 2000s. Putin often states that Russia has separate developmental needs and governing needs than Western countries due to its different historical trajectory. Huntington stressed the need for political order and strong institutions before achieving modernity, liberty, democracy and stability. None of these can be possible without the presence of an orderly and secure environment, important elements that Putin promoted in Russian society. Countries with coherent political orders, whether autocratic or democratic, are likely to exhibit lower levels of social violence. For these reasons among others that will be discussed, stability and order have proven to be more important in Russian cultural values than liberty, and the centralization of power has historically been associated with a safer more orderly environment in Russia. Putin's ability to maintain a high level of support despite his authoritarian tendencies may show that people are ready to sacrifice a certain degree of freedom for the promise of stability. Also, enthusiasm for Putin among the young shows that he does not only appeal to those looking back to past certainties.

Davis and Silver found that the greater people's sense of threat, the lower their support for civil liberties. This effect interacts, however, with trust in government (Davis and Silver 2004). When dealing with national security, a profound choice arises when faced with having to tradeoff liberty. At its most grim, the choice becomes to decide how far the state can go in order to protect itself while avoiding adopting totalitarian constraints on its own citizens. In the USA, it is a tension that arises every day between police and intelligence agencies and the Constitution. The state must decide what powers to concede to the police, the FBI, the CIA and to other arms of the intelligence community. Ullman states that for a leader trying to instill the political will necessary for a national society to respond effectively to a threat to its security, a military threat is especially convenient. The "public good" is much more easily defined; sacrifice can not only be asked but expected; particular interests are more easily co-opted or overridden; it is easier to demonstrate that "business

as usual” must give way to extraordinary measures; and dissent is more readily swept aside in the name of forging a national consensus (Ullman 2011, pp. 11–17). Threats of any kind such as an external enemy or even an internal enemy can therefore be quite necessary for ruling a country. A leader must always have a reason for acting that is supported by the values of the people of that nation and the identity of that nation. In terms of the security over liberty framework, the higher levels of threat exist, the more the security over liberty framework becomes legitimate.

Securitizing Threats

Putin capitalizes on the security over liberty framework through his use of Securitization in International Relations. Putin has framed the West as a threat to Russian security and identity and has created a particular narrative in Russian society that is anti-Western and legitimizes Putin’s actions both domestically and internationally. Securitization in International Relations is the process in which state actors transform a specific issue into being a matter of security and therefore enables extraordinary measures to be used in the name of that security. Issues that manage to become securitized represent the success of an actor to construct an issue into an existential problem. In the process of securitizing an issue, an actor securitizes a particular threat for a particular audience. Therefore, it is a highly studied theme in Constructivism in International Relations due to its focus on the transformation of an issue by an actor into a matter of security to allow for the use of extraordinary measures. The term was coined by Ole Waever in 1995 and is connected with the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al. 1998). But the Copenhagen School sees securitization as a failure to deal with issues of normal politics and therefore prefers “deseuritization” whereby issues are removed from the sphere of exceptionality into the ordinary (Balzacq 2005, p. 173). Not everything can be securitized though. In order for something to be successfully securitized, an actor has to present something as an existential threat to an audience that has to accept it. Only through this acceptance can the issue move above the sphere of normal politics, allowing elites to break normal procedures and rules to fight for that security (Diskaya 2013). Securitizing an issue is largely based on power and capability and the means that one possesses to be able to socially and politically construct

a threat. Emotions, policy tools, images, and other means are mobilized by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build feelings and thoughts about the critical vulnerability of a subject (Balzacq 2015). By securitizing the West and NATO and emphasizing the threat they pose to the survival of Russia's unique civilization and specific political and developmental needs, Putin legitimizes his actions domestically and abroad. Domestically it legitimizes his centralization project and his increasing authoritarian tendencies. Abroad, his actions in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and Syria have succeeded in providing the illusion of great power strength and the restoration of a "Greater Russia" (Nygren 2007), as well as a challenge to the international status quo. Putin has successfully securitized the West as being imperialist and desiring world domination through the guise of spreading democracy and human rights. He has argued that Western actions are a threat to the Slavic identity both in Russia and in the near abroad and created an assertive counter identity based on the rejection of the liberal-democratic-centered world order. Similarly, Bacon et al. argue that many developments in Russia's domestic politics can be explained and analyzed through the discourse of 'securitization' and the use by Russia's political leadership of the rhetoric of existential threat to justify actions increasingly perceived as authoritarian (Bacon et al. 2006).

Contested Basis of Security Perceptions and Realities in Russian–Western Relations

After the Cold War, achieving a consensual peace order proved to be problematic as Russia and the West had differing expectations of the new world order. While Europe and the USA viewed the Cold War as a Western victory and assumed Russia would adapt to the status quo of the North Atlantic community, Russia was more under the impression that the end of the Cold War was a victory for all and that Russia would join a "Greater Europe" where the West would incorporate Russia along with its national identity and values into a renewed West (Sakwa 2017). For the West, nothing needed to change, as their victory demonstrated their overall superiority. For Gorbachev, the end of the Cold War represented a moment where the Russian state would create a new political community with the West as equal founding members. This differing narrative created political division and a new era of confrontation today between Russia and the West. Rather than simply "expanding" the

Atlantic community to incorporate Russia, Gorbachev and successive Russian leaders sought to exploit the fall of the USSR to “transcend” the community (Sakwa 2017). By denying this process, the West precipitated what they sought to avert, which is a resurgent and aggressive Russia. In Russia’s view, Europe cannot be “whole and free” the way George Herbert Walker Bush (Bush 1989) announced it would be, if Russia remains excluded, or an associate member at best. The idea of a “Greater Europe” favors a more pluralistic model and replaces the idea that the EU is the sole representative of Europe. Russia rejects the political order in which Western liberal values were framed. Russia’s beliefs are that the West has consistently expanded what they see as a universally based value system, a practice that undermines the traditional state-centric model of international relations. This is perceived as a threat to Russia’s great power status, security and existence as an independent subject of international politics. Russian grievances in the last three decades all stem from what Russia considers the “foundational myth” that the victory over the USSR signified a universal domination of values by the North Atlantic Community that were not open to compromising with the Russian Federation. Russian mythology on the other hand, stood firmly by the view that Russia was a great power and worthy of being seen as an equal in the management of European and global affairs. Both of these myths clearly had consequences for the dynamics of international politics and the post-Cold War years (Sakwa 2017).

The Re-Assertion of Russia’s Identity Domestically and Internationally

History of a Strong State

Historically, Russia has always needed strong centralized leadership for it to make progress. This was true both in imperial times under tsars such as Peter the Great (who made Russia a European power and built St Petersburg) and Alexander II (who freed the serfs), and since 1917 under Lenin and Stalin. Russia is too big, too diverse and too thinly populated for Western systems of representative democracy to be applied. Culturally, its people are temperamentally suited to following the decisive lead of a strong ruler who can unite them in the face of great challenges. Not only does Russia possess a long history of tsarism, but its traumatic and chaotic experience transitioning from autarky in the 1990s reinforced the importance of the stability of the former. Russia’s trajectory possesses its own cultural

and historical differences and should not be analyzed from a Western lens. Russia's experience should therefore be understood in its own term, in particular the tradition of a "strong state" (Tsygankov 2014, pp. 6–9).

Affirming National Self-Esteem

Vladimir Putin is a firm believer in the "strong state" and has staunchly defended its relevance within Russia's unique civilizational and developmental needs. This process can be explained using Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory is a theory within Social Psychology that originated as a tool to analyze individuals and groups but evolved to apply to nation states. The theory posits that each person desires a positive self-image, which can be gained by identification with a group, and by favorable comparison of that in-group in relation to certain out-groups (Mercer 1995, p. 241). In Constructivism Alexander Wendt has coined this as the definition of the "Self" versus the "Other" which states that it is through the interaction that nations have with one another that nations develop their own affiliations, attachments and identities (Wendt 1999, p. 35). Historically, some nations or cultural communities emerged as more important than others, and it is through these significant "Others" that national "Selves" defined their appropriate character and types of actions. The significant "Other" establishes the meaningful context for the "Self"'s existence and development and therefore exerts decisive influence on the "Self." Through its actions, the "Other" may reinforce or erode the earlier established sense of national identity of the "Self". Depending on whether these influences are read by the Self as extending or denying it recognition, they may either encourage or discourage the Self to act cooperatively. The USA's and the West's policies toward Russia leaned more toward the erosion of its prior identity and included a lack of recognition toward Russia on a number of political, economic and security issues, as will be explained in the following chapters, that have led Russia to behave in ways the West deems "aggressive."

Social Identity Theory on the level of International Relations posits that national political leaders can be expected to seek to establish a positive identity for their country. Social Identity Theory allows Constructivists to analyze the formation of group identities based on social psychology. SIT emphasizes the need for positive self-esteem, which is a missing element from structural analyses that is required in explaining why nations seek to improve or maintain a positive status. It incorporates the roles that perceptions of "Self" and "Other" play in

defining status and generating behavior toward others. The factors that contribute to the development of a collective self-esteem include inter-subjective memories of the past national “Self” and the aspirations they generate for the future. These motivations are the basis from which political elites create national identities and interests. This in turn garners national self-esteem and furthers the elite’s preferred form of social order, especially during times of great change (Clunan 2012, p. 6). The discourse usually portrays a “Self” and an “Other,” a depiction that encourages a generally cooperative relationship toward “in-group members” and a generally competitive relationship with “out-group members” (Clunan 2012, p. 6).

The social elite promote their preferred national self-image in the public discourse through certain identity management strategies. SIT discusses a variety of identity management strategies in reaction to an unfavorable identity for a social group which state leaders can apply to enhance their national self-esteem. By being consistently undermined by the West’s lack of recognition toward Russia, Russia naturally adopted a “lower self-esteem” as its position in the world did not match its aspirations. These strategies include “social mobility,” “social competition” and “social creativity.” A nation that sees itself as possessing a lower status than another nation may use the strategy of social mobility which entails the acceptance and emulation of the norms of nations with higher status, and aspire to join that group of nations (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, pp. 63–95; Clunan 2012, p. 10). Social competition accepts the criteria for the assessment of status among nations but attempts to change the negative ranking of one’s lower-status nation (Clunan 2012, p. 11). For example, if status is achieved through economic development, military strength, and spheres of influence, a country can try to accumulate these to equal or surpass the higher status nations (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, p. 72). The third strategy is called social creativity where members of a group with a lower level of esteem “may seek positive distinctiveness for the in-group by redefining or altering the elements of the comparative situation” (Tajfel and Turner 1986, p. 19). This entails changing the frames of comparison entirely so that a characteristic that was seen as negative is now presented as positive (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, p. 67), or to shift to a different dimension as the basis of the rankings of nations, making it possible to claim that one’s nation is superior in relation to that dimension. Also, changing the focus of comparison, so that one’s nation is compared with a group of countries of

lower status, rather than being compared with the group of countries with the highest ranking, is included in social creativity.

Similarly, Clunan speaks of “Aspirational Constructivism” in the case of Russia, which suggests that a logic of aspiration is responsible for the creation of national identities and national interests. These aspirations include the human need for self-esteem, or in the case of a nation state, collective self-esteem. The political elite generate aspirations for the nation’s self-image through historical memories of the nation’s previous status and purpose. Once the main purposes of correct style of governance, mission and international status have been established and are considered historically legitimate and politically effective, political elites publicly promote this image. International and domestic conditions are important in assessing whether political elites will view a particular self-image as practical and as conforming to their historical aspirations (Clunan 2009).

Social Creativity and the Eurasian and Civilizationist Identity

This study argues that due to a negative national self-esteem that formed through the employment of the other management strategies of emulating the West and competing with it based on accepted norms, in recent years, Putin has used social creativity to change the frames of comparison, a strategy which has led to a positive national self-esteem and greatly contributes to his successful approval ratings and to his global impact. As Russian scholar Dmitri Trenin concurs, Russia’s policies pose a challenge to the West and will continue to challenge the US dominated world order. Trenin states that Russia is unique and that its ruling elite strongly rejects domination of the international system by any one power (Trenin 2016). However, this social creativity is taking place at an additional level other than challenging the security environment; it is taking place at a moral level which encompasses questions on how to govern a country effectively, how to define sovereignty and national identity, and how to maintain the traditional Christian values that originally shaped Western culture. Putin has provided an alternative framework for how to view the West through describing it as being morally lax, hypocritical, corrupt, and imperialist.

The perception of threat increases when a country possesses both military might and a different identity (Rousseau 2007). How power and identity are intertwined to form lasting threats plays an important role between Russia and the West’s relationship over the years.

Through social creativity, Putin has managed to create an entirely different platform upon which to compare values, morality, leadership, and global stability. Through the emphasis of Russia's identity as being "Eurasianist" and "Civilizationist," or holding the values of conservatism, multipolarity in world affairs, and prioritizing national sovereignty and identity, and through the implantation of its 'sovereign democracy' at home, Russia has emphasized its "unique" civilization and way of life as superior to that of the West. Putin has created a "symbolic" form of power. Contrary to the materialist definition of power, which lies in military strength or economic power, Constructivist theory emphasizes the importance of social meaning attached to objects or practices (Barkin 2003, pp. 325–342). Both Neorealism and Neoliberalism are material approaches to world politics and explain behavior as being a result of material forces. Mearsheimer argued that "the distribution of material capabilities among states is the key factor for understanding world politics" (Barkin 2003, pp. 325–342). Among Neoliberals, Robert Keohane identifies states' material interests as distinct from people's ideas about the world and posits that people's ideas are shaped by the material hypothesis (Longman and Keohane 1994, pp. 3–30). Jeffrey Legro summarizes the Constructivist understanding of ideas: "Ideas are not so much mental as symbolic and organizational; they are embedded not only in human brains but also in the 'collective memories,' government procedures, educational systems, and the rhetoric of statecraft" (Legro 2005, p. 6). Putin's use of state media to emphasize and prioritize the values of Russia's identity in the world has played an important role in the construction of Russia's collective identity, as will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The Sovereign Democracy

President Putin stated to the Russian Duma that "the collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (Putin 2005). At the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin presented an attack on the USA and the West and announced that it was back as a major international actor and would not follow the lead of the West in terms of security and foreign policy issues. Russia asserted that it was not bound by the Western definition of democracy and that it was trying to establish a "sovereign democracy" that would be independent from external influence (Putin 2007). Petrov and McFaul's definition of this term implies a strong presidency coupled with weak institutions, state

control over the media, control over elections, short-term effectiveness and long-term inefficiency (Petrov and McFaul 2005). Moreover, the implementation of “sovereign democracy” as a form of governance is part of a major element of Russia’s soft power project designed to challenge the Euro-Atlantic status quo and demonstrate that Russia is unique and just as legitimate as the USA or Europe (Stent 2014, pp. 142–143), an act that has gained Putin tremendous respect and popularity at home. Russia’s approach to sovereignty reflects a close linkage between Putin’s recentralizing project domestically and re-assertion of Russia’s position as a great power on the international scene.

A Constructivist approach is found to be useful in treating sovereignty as it helps to explain the challenges of developing a new post-Soviet identity, the role of culture and historical interpretation in foreign policy, Russian concepts of the hostile “Other” and domestic ideas linked to Russian concepts of federalism—all critical factors in understanding Russian foreign policy behavior (Ziegler 2012, pp. 400–417). The major ideological construct of the post-communist period—sovereign democracy—insists that both sovereignty and democracy are socially and culturally determined and therefore clash with Western interpretations of these concepts. The emergence of a new, postmodern, and Western-dominated set of global norms limiting sovereignty is closely linked to continued tensions between Russia and the West (Ziegler 2012, pp. 400–417), and, as will be discussed, with competing factions within Western society that have demonstrated respect for Putin’s belief system.

After the fall of the USSR, Russia faced a profound identity crisis. At the end of the Cold War, a country with seemingly European roots found itself trying to reconnect with its “significant Other” after decades of lacking recognition from it. Today, Russia’s foreign policy actions are best understood as reflecting “civilizational” ideas rather than economic or material power conditions (Tsygankov 2007). Different perspectives have emerged to define what is appropriate for Russia today in terms of its identity prospective. Some argue that the “return” to Europe is the best strategy, while others caution that cultural integration with Europe would constitute a significant sacrifice on the part of Russia’s values which include a strong state, the Orthodox religion and a collectivist economy. This debate is Russia’s civilizational dilemma; how can Russia connect with its European ‘Other’ while preserving its own ‘Self’? The Sovereign democracy that has developed in Russia has also been referred to as a new intellectual movement of “national democracy” that seeks to

emulate conservative West European nationalism. Kolsto and Blackkisrud argue that nationalism is featuring increasingly in Russian society and public discourse. Russian nationalism is now focusing more and more on ethnic issues as opposed to imperialism or pride in a large, strong and multiethnic state (Kolstø 2016).

Autocratic Stability

Scholars have often pondered how authoritarian regimes manage to stay in power. Bueno de Mesquita et al. found that oppressive governments can stay in power with certain strategies. The provision of certain public goods is very important for the survival of the regime, while the withholding of others is equally necessary. Providing public goods such as freedom of the press and civil liberties, for one, will reduce the chances of regime survival. In fact, they noted that the greater the suppression of these “coordination goods,” the greater the lag between economic growth and the emergence of liberal democracy. Second, their study showed that providing public goods such as primary education, public transportation and health care did not risk their survival. The study found that significant economic growth can be attained and sustained even while government suppresses “coordination goods,” in which cases the regime’s chances of survival improve and the likelihood of democratization decreases (Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2005). In political science, “strategic coordination” refers to the strategies groups must follow to win political power in a given situation. These activities include disseminating information, recruiting and organizing opposition members, choosing leaders, and developing a viable strategy to increase the group’s power and to influence policy. “Coordination goods” are the public goods that affect the ability of political opponents to coordinate but have little impact on economic growth. Coordination goods are distinct from public goods, which have an impact both on economic growth as well as public opinion such as transportation, health care, education and national defense. Bueno de Mesquita and Downs state that if authoritarian incumbents can limit strategic coordination by the opposition, they can reduce the prospect of being removed from power. However, they must do this without also raising the costs of economic coordination, as this could stymie economic growth and threaten the stability of the regime. In addition, Desai et al. emphasize the importance of economic delivery for authoritarian regimes to stay in power. This arrangement has been coined the “Authoritarian Bargain” (Desai et al. 2007).

However, healthy economic development goes hand in hand with the creation of a healthier middle class which may start to demand political freedoms and civil rights (Lipset 1959, pp. 69–105). This framework was argued by scholars such as Seymour Martin Lipset, who first popularized the notion that economic growth leads to democratization by increasing the size of the educated middle class. Although development theorists such as Lipset may be right in assuming that increases in per capita income lead to increases in popular demand for political power, the power of the regime to undermine these changes is underestimated. Western development institutions, as well as Western governments, have claimed that globalization and the spread of market capitalism inevitably lead to the spread of liberal democracy everywhere. However, the results of such efforts do not show the spread and proliferation of liberal democracy (Desai et al. 2007). Additionally, Russian scholar Lev Kudkov speaks of the concept of “negative mobilization” as a strategy of authoritarian regimes to retain approval which refers to a population rallying around a leader with nationalist sentiment when presented with an external threat (Kudkov 2014). Concurrently, Catarina Kinnvall confirms that nationalism is among the most powerful responses to exogenous pressures (Kinnvall 2004, pp. 741–767). This study adds to this conversation by adding the important element of the provision of order, stability and a positive national identity. In the case of Russia, the provision of order, security and stability were more important than individual freedoms, and the re-establishment of “great power status” restored national self-esteem despite economic woes.

Regime Hybridity

Many neighboring countries view Russia as an attractive frame of government due to their similar historical trajectories. The collapse of the USSR pushed many countries to try to democratize, but these countries have mostly “hybridized” (Schedler 2002; Ottaway 2003; Levitsky and Way 2010). After the Cold War, Levitsky and Way began calling many of the former Soviet states as “Competitive Authoritarian” regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010). This type of regime fits into the category of “regime hybridity” which refers to a regime type that neither fits neatly into a democracy nor a full-blown authoritarian regime. The theory is based on the observations that after the fall of the USSR, regimes did not all successfully transition into democracies and many of them remained in an “in-between” gray zone that combines electoral competition

while possessing certain degrees of authoritarianism, electoral manipulation, unfair media access, abuse of state resources, and biases toward the incumbent. After the Cold War, the hybrid regimes that made up the former Soviet states followed diverse trajectories and although some democratized, many did not. The reason for the varying degrees of democratization may have to do with the level of the country's ties to the West and the strength of its governing party. The higher these were, the more likely it was that these regimes would democratize. Where linkage to the West was low, regime outcomes hinged on incumbents' organization power: where state and governing party structures were organized and cohesive, regimes remained stable and authoritarian, and where they were underdeveloped or lacked cohesion, they were unstable and rarely democratized (Levitsky and Way 2010, p. 5). Due to Russia's military might and economic strength, Western influence in the region was blunted and Russia became the regional power. Russia, Belarus and Armenia are examples of how low leverage and high organizational power contributed to hybrid authoritarian stability in the post-Cold War period. The relatively low organizational power in Russia in the early 1990s gave rise to a series of regimes crises. Under Putin between 1999 and 2008, increased state and party capacity illuminated the instability of the 1990s and the regime consolidated as it continued to be largely immune from outside pressure. In addition, Russia's massive oil and gas reserves and the rising energy prices of the 2000s further ensured reduced Western leverage. Based on this theory, in countries with low leverage to the West, it would be advisable to have a strong governing power or be tied to a regional strong governing power such as Russia, especially in the face of the challenges of modernization and democratization, otherwise the country would be prone to chaos, instability and violence.

Another reason for incorporating Comparative Politics in this study is to emphasize that countries all have their distinctive historical trajectories, regime type and developmental needs and may benefit from other forms of government. Some authors such as Fukuyama have suggested democracy to be the end of history and that democratizing countries are on a linear path to liberal democracy (Fukuyama 2002).² A new strand

²Fukuyama argued the advent of Western liberal democracy may signal the endpoint of humanity's sociocultural evolution and the final form of human government.

of literature has instead emphasized the sustainability of the “hybrid regime,” on which this study expands the discussion. A disenchantment with democracy has been noted in many parts of the world due to the inability of developing countries to reach democratic consolidation because of looming corruption, persisting violence, and institutional weakness. Even developed democracies have felt this disenchantment due to their own problems with stalemate, deadlock and economic stagnation (Kuttner 2015). According to the Levada Center, Russian opinion polls suggest that the population of Russia is generally supportive of democracy in theory but fears putting it into practice (Levada Center, 2016). This may be explained by the chaotic decade of the 1990s when Russia attempted a democratization process and was severely disappointed by the results. A hybrid regime on the other hand is characterized by the coexistence of nominally democratic institutions—a multiparty system, competitive elections, a legislature—with the persistent practice of authoritarian patterns of governance, the latter leading to the systematic alteration of the rules guaranteed by the former (Schedler 2002; Ottaway 2003; Levitsky and Way 2002, pp. 51–65). Elections are regularly held and have the potential to be contested but are often manipulated and state power is abused by way of biased media coverage. In hybrid regimes, executive-legislative relations exist, and parliaments may be very weak, but they still function as a potential platform for the opposition. Moreover, such states have poor rule of law, and the government attempts to subordinate the judiciary through bribery or extortion (Levitsky and Way 2002, pp. 51–65). Regimes have evolved in different ways due to different historical trajectories and ruling powers. Russia’s regime is sustainable in its institutionalization of corruption and cohesive elite as it continues to provide order and stability in the society and has now re-enforced its national pride through the restoration of great power status. As long as regimes possess the consent of the governed, they will remain stable.

Concluding Remarks

This literature review has presented the main theories that will be used as supporting arguments to the data presented throughout this study to explain Putin’s popularity. Through the creation of a “strong” and centralized state, Putin has ensured a sense of security and stability, both features that have been demonstrated to be more important than Western

notions of ‘liberty’ for the Russian population and in states facing either economic, political, military or existential threats. Through the use of securitization, Putin has successfully argued Western actions as a threat to Russia’s safety and national identity. Although Putin’s state is defined by elite corruption and networks of power, this “hybrid” regime has demonstrated resilience and high levels of popularity despite economic difficulties and tightening political controls. The sustainability of this “Hybrid regime” also lies within the framework of a newly found positive national self-esteem. The identity that Putin has created for Russia is based on notions of Russia’s unique civilization and developmental needs as well the re-assertion of its distinctive values abroad. This has instilled a sense of national pride that surmounts economic difficulties and rather reinforces the legitimacy of authoritarian tendencies as being necessary for Russia instead of being viewed as negative. Russia has created a new platform for power in international relations where it comes out as the leader of the anti-liberal movement. In so doing, it has created a symbolic form of power for itself that challenges Western norms, a feat that has garnered both criticism and praise internationally and nothing but respect from the majority of the Russian population itself. Russia’s symbolic power coupled with its military might render it a real challenge to the Western establishment. Below, a discussion is presented on the international climate of the day, which pertains to the legitimacy of Putin’s conservative message. This discussion then continues in the conclusion of this study.

Nations are facing profound identity crises. These range from divisions on what it means to be a Muslim in the Middle East, to national revivals in China and Russia, to questioning European Union membership in Europe, to questioning the meaning of the American creed in making policies in today’s multiethnic American society. Putin is taking an assertive position on prioritizing national identity above “international” efforts. Prioritizing national identity and political rhetoric involving “making one’s country great again” have gained an enormous amount of popular appeal in many parts of the world. Today, many parts of the world perceive themselves to be in conditions of threat due to increasing migration, increasing terrorism, and an imbalanced recovery from the 2008 financial crisis. As Huntington stated in his study on American identity,

Various forces challenging the core American culture and Creed could generate a move by native white Americans to revive the discarded and discredited racial and ethnic concepts of American identity and to create an

America that would exclude, expel, or suppress people of other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Historical and contemporary experience suggest that this is a highly probable reaction from a once dominant ethnic-racial group that feels threatened by the rise of other groups. It could produce a racially intolerant country with high levels of intergroup conflict. (Huntington 2004, p. 20)

This passage has been quoted due to its relevance to today's political climate in the USA and some European countries. Right and left-wing populist parties are gaining momentum through their nationalist rhetoric which points to the fact that nationalism is still very prevalent in the world today and will continue to be a tendency, especially in today's "high threat" environment. Entering a "post-national" world seems highly unlikely. Post-nationalism can be defined as the process by which the national identity of a nation loses importance relative to supranational and global entities (George and Bennett 2005, p. 232). Increasing globalization in terms of international trade and the importance of multinational corporations and internationalization of financial markets have shifted the economy to becoming more international in nature. Simultaneously, political power is also partially transferred to supranational entities such as multinational corporations, the United Nations, the European Union and NATO to name a few examples. In addition, the media have become much more international and have also had a "merging" effect on people's mentality. Also, migration between countries has contributed to the formation of post-national identities and belief systems. The trend today to revert to more national sensations is a direct reaction to the over "post-nationalization" of the economy, politics and society, or a threat to the loss of a national identity (Koopmans and Statham 1999, pp. 652–696), thus explaining the recent political victory of certain pro-national leaders such as Donald Trump in the USA. Populist parties tend to exploit the public's feelings of fear, racism, and xenophobia as a political tool (Zakaria 2016). The West is facing certain challenges and populism has surged due to its grand rhetoric and promises for revolutionary change. Putin has periodically met or shown support for leaders of these movements in the West. Russia is working to empower Europe's far-right and Eurosceptic parties through cooperation, loans, political cover and propaganda in return for praise from these parties for its foreign policy and strongman leadership. He does this to undermine Western liberal-democratic values and institutions, as a divide and conquer strategy. Putin represents a patriotic hero who

prioritizes national traditions and *realpolitik* over the globalization that characterizes Western liberal-democratic values that leaders of these parties want to imitate (Wesslau 2016). Similar to Putin, these parties tend to be anti-immigration and tough on terrorism. The upsurge of populism in Europe is an anti-establishment movement wanting to challenge the mainstream liberal order and undo the European project. They are generally suspicious of the USA and want to reduce its influence in Europe. The European Center on Foreign Relations conducted a survey of these parties, which they term “insurgent” parties, and found that a majority of them are positively inclined toward Putin’s Russia (Dennison and Parijs 2016). This can be explained through the parties’ ideological affinity with socially conservative values, defense of national sovereignty, and rejection of liberal internationalism and interventionism. In these ways, Russia is seen as a counter to Western domination of liberal values globally. Putin is capitalizing on the rising popularity of these parties as “evidence” that the West is undergoing a demise. This rhetoric is part of his symbolic power, as he continues to have influence on anti-liberal constituents and even on liberal constituents that no longer believe in the power of liberal democracy.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study is a single-country case study. Using both quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods, this study then provides a qualitative analysis of the empirical findings to explain the phenomenon of Vladimir Putin’s popularity. It is a hypothesis-generating and refining case study which seeks to generate new hypotheses inductively and to refine existing ones. It identifies the validity of a set of empirical indicators and their interaction effects. These indicators include political liberties and civil rights, economic performance, security, foreign policy actions, and presidential approval ratings. This is a descriptive study that attempts to identify several possible explanations and their relative importance in explaining Putin’s popularity.

The timeframe of the research question takes place during Putin’s last term, 2012–the present day, due to the puzzle it presents. However, to answer the question correctly, it is necessary to analyze the political, social and economic situation in Russia from the fall of the Soviet Union until the present day. Variations in the indicators of this study are presented from 1991 until 2017 to provide the needed evidentiary support

for the final argument. The reasons for the selection of Putin's last term as the primary time frame of the study are multifold. Firstly, the critical juncture in the 2011–2012 elections where the Russian population took to the streets and actively rebelled against a corrupt and authoritarian political system is very indicative of rising qualms and dissatisfaction among the Russian population. At this point, Putin's approval ratings had reached what is considered a low for his standards at 62% (Levada Center, 2017). Secondly, following these protests, Putin, who was elected for a third term, tightened the reins on political and civil freedoms and Russia became increasingly authoritarian. Thirdly, Putin began acting more assertively internationally. And lastly, the fall in the price of oil in 2014 led to a stagnating economy that eventually fell into a recession, lowering the standard of living in Russia. Interestingly enough, however, rather than remaining lower than usual or decreasing even more after the 2011–2012 protests, Putin's approval ratings dramatically spiked in 2014 and reached a high of 89% and remained high ever since (Levada Center, 2017). Through a comprehensive process-tracing exercise, this study analyzes the evolution of Russian domestic politics, economic performance, security and foreign policy shifts, and provides an argument on Putin's continued high approval ratings today despite adverse circumstances.

The methodological techniques that were used include the gathering of opinion polls to demonstrate population approval ratings and perceptions and noting their bivariate correlation with economic and security statistics, levels of authoritarianism and foreign policy actions. These indicators are qualitatively analyzed and are presented in a process-tracing exercise starting from the fall of the Soviet Union to the present day. Statistics were collected from both Russian and international newspapers, from the Russian government, from the World Bank and from the United Nations office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The review of secondary literature includes literature from academic journal articles, Russian and Western newspapers, and books. The selection of secondary literature was based on key authors that are known to be experts in the field. A balance of both pro-Russian and anti-Russian opinions was used to provide as unbiased an analysis as possible. The primary documents that were collected stem from the Russian government and consist of reports on crime statistics in Russia. Direct speech analysis was performed based on foreign and domestic policy speeches that Putin as well as other

Russian politicians have given either inside the Kremlin, on Russian state media, or at important international meetings. An analysis of foreign policy actions and shifts was made using secondary sources such as Russian and American newspapers and published accounts in books and journal articles.

Opinion polls were collected from the Levada Center, from the Pew Research Center, from Gallup, and from the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion and the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs at the University of Chicago to present an accurate perception of the public opinion in Russia and to collect primary data. In addition, opinion polls and preferences of the population were also taken from secondary literature sources such as Russian and Western newspapers and journal articles. These include reports on regional variations throughout the country. It is important to emphasize that due to the reliance on these opinion polls to construct the argument of this study, it was important to gather data from different sources in order to avoid the all-too-common manipulation strategies used by the government in Russia. One can easily argue that due to the suppressive nature of the Russian government, people have no choice but to approve. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence that this is not the case, as a variety of different sources have all exclaimed similar results and have confirmed that Putin is indeed well-liked in Russia. The Levada Center has been the most reliable polling agency in Russia for a decade. In 2013, the government wanted to name it a “foreign agent” due to its independent sources of funding that come from abroad, pointing to the fact that it is not biased toward the government. This threat came after it published Putin’s lower approval ratings in 2011 and 2012 (Balmforth 2013). The other sources used to measure Putin’s popularity are all Western sources who have no personal interest in manipulating the data such as The NORC at the University of Chicago who has for more than 75 years delivered reliable data and rigorous analysis, Gallup, who is considered a leading poll of public opinion, and The Pew Research Center (Knowledge at Wharton 2007).

Though the above indicators do not exhaust all potential explanatory factors for Putin’s popularity, they are valid in themselves as proxy indicators to possibly explain this phenomenon and to juxtapose his time in office with Yeltsin’s. They are general operational indicators of levels of satisfaction and well-being of the population toward their leader. Variation in these indicators or the lack thereof will be demonstrated

alongside public perception of the president's performance domestically and internationally to argue the main premises of this study.

SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study defends an empirically supported argument analyzed through a unique theoretical framework that determines why Putin remains popular and even experienced an increase in popularity ratings in the face of economic decline and external sanctions. The research question is unique as it presents a puzzle. The argument has been presented in a tight, coherent narrative which incorporates both the domestic and international aspects of a new positive national self-esteem that goes beyond available accounts. The use of the Social Creativity framework has not been commonly used to argue Russia's actions and provides an interesting perspective on reasons for Putin's positive approval ratings today. It helps to analyze Russia's self-description as "Eurasianist," "Civilizationist" and as a "Sovereign Democracy" and how it challenges international norms and the status quo and receives important symbolic power by doing so.

In addition, this study promotes hypothesis-generating conclusions for the literature on hybrid regime sustainability. It argues for the importance of the provision of stability and order in a society and the establishment of a strong national identity that prioritizes the historical traditions of that culture and society to continue to garner positive approval ratings in times of insecurity, be it economic, physical, or existential. It contributes to the study of democratization and the spread of democracy in a multipolar world order and further builds on literature that asserts that democracy is not the end of history due to the different developmental needs that each country possesses as well as their different responses to more authoritarian style leadership.

The limitations of this study are that it is a single-country case study and is therefore not generalizable across cases, and that it does not encompass a significant enough time frame in Russia's history to incorporate more variation in the independent and dependent variables. Nevertheless, it is an important stepping stone and valuable contribution to the fields of International Relations and Comparative Politics.

This study promotes topical avenues for future research by suggesting why today's political climate is especially relevant to Putin's conservative message. A "post-national" world is highly unlikely due to the

salience of questions of national identity, as this study has demonstrated. Questions come to mind such as why in the second decade of the twenty-first century do we see a country like Russia walking away from democracy? What are the factors that explain the sustained popularity of a man that does not perform economically nor have respect for human rights and is taking the country on an aggressive foreign policy ride? What does Russia's identity turn mean for the rest of the world? Why is the world seeing increased nationalist tendencies and how does Putin affect this trend?

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1: Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, and Organization of the Study

This chapter introduces the research question, the indicators that were examined, the possible explanations for Putin's popularity, the methodological techniques used in the gathering of the data and the construction of the argument, the theories used to support the data collected, the general argument, the contributions and limitations of the study, and the organization of the chapters.

Chapter 2: Yeltsin vs Putin (1999–2008)

This chapter provides an analysis of the domestic and international policy indicators in Russia from 1999–2008 to explain the basis of Putin's popularity and contrasts these indicators with Yeltsin era domestic and international policy and approval ratings.

Chapter 3: Putin's Leadership 2012–2017

This chapter analyzes the indicators of this study between 2012 and 2017 and argues why Putin continues to be popular today despite adverse circumstances.

Chapter 4: Main Argument and Theoretical Analysis

This chapter argues the main points of this study through its theoretical framework.

Chapter 5: Conclusion, Further Discussion, and Avenues for Future Research

This chapter concludes the study and its main arguments and suggests avenues for future research. It will also generate a further discussion on the implications the study has in today's political climate.

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CHAPTER 2

Yeltsin vs Putin (1999–2008)

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This chapter will demonstrate that Putin's positive ratings can be explained through his establishment of order and stability, security, increased quality of life in Russian society, and a clearer foreign policy more geared toward Russia's interests. As will also be demonstrated, the absence of these factors affected the public perception of Boris Yeltsin in comparison. This chapter addresses the domestic transformations that Putin instilled, and how he originally gained respect and popularity during his first two terms in office.

On September 23, 1999, after a series of apartment bombings in Moscow where 300 people died, the Russian army began bombing the city of Grozny once again. The following day, Vladimir Putin ordered the army to engage in combat in Chechnya even though he was only the Prime Minister at this time: an office having no authority over the military. The actions and rhetoric of Putin that day were quite symbolic of the future of his leadership style and presidency. In his first televised appearance, Putin's rhetoric included aggressive phrases toward Chechen terrorists such as "we will hunt them down, wherever we find them, we will destroy them. Even if we find them in the toilet. We will run them out in the outhouse" (Gessen 2012, p. 25). Putin's rhetoric was exemplary of a man who was intending to rule with a hard fist. The public rewarded the new leader's bellicose rhetoric with soaring approval ratings.

In fact, the more the military campaign in Chechnya escalated, the more the country was pleased (Gessen 2012, pp. 26).

Yeltsin resigned at the end of 1999 and called Putin in to be acting President. That, along with the Nationalist Party OVR's decision to back Putin broadened his political support, leaving the Communist party as the only real opposition. In the presidential election, one that was marked by media bias, fraud, and abuse of state resources, Putin won with 53% of the vote (Myagkov 2001). International observers found that the Unity party and Putin had received a disproportionate share of coverage on state television. The coverage itself proved to be quite unbalanced, advancing a series of rumors and insinuations about other candidates. The European Institute for the Media concluded that the media was heavily biased toward Putin and portrayed him as being a "strong and decisive Commander-in-Chief" who defended Russia against Chechen "terrorists." He was also shown to be traveling around the country promising high salaries and more regional support in the provinces (European Institute for the Media 2000, pp. 2, 32, 38).

THE ECONOMY

During Yeltsin's time in office, Yegor Gaidar was the Acting Prime Minister of Russia from June 15, 1992, to December 14, 1992. He implemented the shock therapy reforms after the fall of the USSR which included abolished price regulation by the state. These actions resulted in a major increase in prices and amounted to officially authorizing a market economy in Russia. He is held responsible by many Russians for the economic difficulties the country faced in the 1990s including mass poverty and hyperinflation. However, he did seem to earn more praise from liberals who said that he was merely doing what he had to do to save the country from collapsing (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2009). Nevertheless, Gaidar's privatization reforms along with the breakup of state assets led to the rise of the infamous Russian oligarchs. These oligarchs became billionaires through the voucher privatization program by arbitraging between old domestic prices for Russian commodities and world market prices. These oligarchs hid their money in Swiss banks rather than investing in the Russian economy and were thus referred to as "kleptocrats" (Granville 2003, pp. 448–457). Levada Center survey results demonstrate the general attitude of the population toward his economic reforms, which were mostly negative (Fig. 2.1).

	Jan.00	Dec.15
Very positive	2	1
Mostly positive	6	10
Mostly negative	34	27
Very negative	43	31
It is difficult to say	16	31

Fig. 2.1 Russian attitude toward Gaidar economic reforms (The Levada Center, April 5, 2016, *What is your attitude toward the Gaidar reforms of 1992?*)

Viktor Chernomyrdin replaced Gaidar and supported partial reforms that only benefited elite circles. These partial reforms included big budget deficits, insider privatization, and partial price and trade liberalization, which created great opportunities for corruption and oligarchic capitalism. Capital was concentrated in only a few sectors such as banking, trade and services, and the export of raw material such as oil and gas. The production of manufactured goods decreased throughout the decade. Big business became closely tied to the state, as small enterprises were discouraged. The relationship between the state and big business ultimately led to Russian bankers becoming extremely wealthy through the financing of state transfers, privatization and the loans for shares program. These money-making schemes through political connections thus encouraged rent-seeking behavior in Yeltsin's Russia (McFaul 2000, pp. 42–47, 50–58). As will be further discussed, Putin's imposition of vertical power in Russia insured that power returned to state offices from corporate ones under Yeltsin.

The economy in Russia during the 1990s performed very poorly. Between 1991 and 1998, Russia lost nearly 30% of its GDP and suffered high levels of inflation which affected the average Russian's standard of living. In addition, the country experienced important levels of capital flight, with close to \$150 billion worth flowing out between 1992 and 1999. In 1992, the first year of economic reform, retail prices in Russia increased by 2520% (Country Studies US 2017). Also, severe fluctuations in the exchange rate of the ruble occurred, leading to a currency crisis. From July 1992 to October 1995, the rate of exchange between the ruble and the dollar declined from 144 rubles per US\$1 to around 5000 per US\$1 (Country Studies US 2017). Moreover, the financial crisis that began in

Asia in the summer of 1997 spread to Russia causing further decline in the ruble, which was further exacerbated by the drop in oil prices at the end of the year. In 1998, Russia devalued the ruble and defaulted on its debt and GDP growth once again became negative, declining by 4.9% (Johnston 2016).

When Putin took over the presidency, he implemented a significant amount of pro-growth economic reforms. These reforms included a comprehensive tax reform of a flat income tax of 13% and widespread deregulation allowing small and medium-sized enterprises to thrive (Aslund 2008). Also, the economy benefited from the rising commodity prices and GDP grew about 7% per year (World Bank 2017). Disposable incomes more than doubled and the value of consumer credit increased dramatically which allowed for a boom in private consumption (SamaraToday 2006). Additionally, the number of people living below the poverty line declined from 30% in 2000 to 14% in 2008 (CIA 2017). Nevertheless, a report by Credit Suisse revealed that 110 wealthy individuals own 35% of all financial assets held by Russian households (Credit Suisse 2013, 53), resulting in one of the most unequal societies in the world, and actually ranked the most unequal in 2016 by Credit Suisse (Withnall 2016). Russia still, however, maintained fiscal discipline with budget surpluses every year from 2000 to 2007 despite inflation due to the central bank's aggressive policy of expanding money supply to combat the appreciation of the ruble. Though Russia was hit by the global credit crunch in 2008, proactive and timely responses by the government and central bank prevented any long-term damage from occurring and shielded the banking system from the effects of the global financial crisis (Fidrmuc and Süß 2009).

The Russian economy mostly relies on energy revenues to drive its growth and has an abundance of oil, natural gas and precious metals. The World Bank estimates the total value of Russia's natural resources at \$75 trillion (Russell 2015). Between 2000 and 2012, Russia's energy exports fueled rapid growth in living standards raising real disposable income by 160% (Rosstat 2017). During this time, unemployment and poverty more than halved and levels of life satisfaction significantly rose (Guriev and Tsyvinski 2010, pp. 12–13). Russia was accepted into the WTO after 16 years of negotiation in 2011, and in 2013 was labeled a high-income country by the World Bank (Chernitsa 2011). By 2012, the oil and gas sector accounted for 16% of GDP, 52% of federal budget revenues and over 70% of total exports.

The process of state rebuilding accelerated under Putin who improved fiscal health due in large part to rising energy prices which also allowed Putin to strengthen central state authority, re-assert central control over tax, the police, and other state agencies (Huskey 2001, pp. 113–142). Organizational power was enhanced by expanded state control over key sectors of the economy such as transportation, communication, and energy. Between 2000 and 2007, the Russian state's share of oil production rose from 16% to 50% which generated massive revenues considering the higher global energy prices (Foy 2007). By mid-2015, about 55% of the Russian economy was in state hands (Aven 2015). The economic prosperity that Russia enjoyed throughout this time was very important toward its increasing authoritarianism and international might. The stronger it became internally, the bolder it acted internationally.

INCREASING AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ORDER

During Yeltsin's time in office, Russia was in the midst of the destruction of the old regime and the construction of a new order. The economy was in shambles and there were shortages of basic goods. Inflation was rampant; trade came to a halt and production declined rapidly. The political situation was complicated and uncertain, as the Russian state did not officially exist yet. Russia had no sovereign border, no sovereign currency, no sovereign army, and weak, ill-defined institutions. Moreover, there was no clearly defined plan as Russia's elite and society were divided and polarized between those favoring reforms and those that wanted to preserve the old political and economic order (Aven 2015). Conditions in Russia at this time were unstable, a fundamental problem for the average citizen. This included federal conflicts which led to Tatarstan holding a successful independence referendum and an all-out war in Chechnya. All subnational governments except Chechnya had agreed to acquiesce to a minimal maintenance of federal order led by the center. After two years, with more than 100,000 lives lost, Russian soldiers went home in defeat. An end to the war was negotiated in 1996 without any resolution to Chechnya's sovereign status, which only led to the outbreak of war once again in 1999 (McFaul 2000, pp. 42–47, 50–58).

During his time as president, Yeltsin enjoyed an enormous media advantage, but other than that, the regime was relatively open at this time. Elections were highly competitive, and the legislature wielded

considerable power. Moreover, private mass media channels such as Gusinsky's NTV regularly criticized Yeltsin and provided a platform for opposition (Troxel 2003). The relative pluralism of the 1990s was implemented due to Yeltsin's support for it but it was also what caused disagreements within government. This is very important to note, as this is how Russians formed a skeptical view on democracy and continue to register support for Putin's "special form of democracy" today, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 3. This environment posed a serious challenge to regime stability in Russia in the 1990s (McFaul 2005, pp. 5–19). State cohesion in Russia was weak in the 1990s due to the collapse of the Soviet state, economy and Communist party, the primary source of central control during the USSR. This triggered bureaucratic chaos, as elements of the state apparatus were completely outside central control and acted at their own direction. Regional leaders would ignore central directives and gained *de facto* control over natural resources in their territories and policies such as citizenship, tax, and privatization, usually the purviews of the central government (Treisman 1999). The regime was therefore decentralized and lacked the element of unity on political and economic decision-making, all elements that are now present under Putin's leadership even though these were achieved through a removal of certain political liberties.

Six days after his victory, Putin proposed a set of bills all aimed at strengthening vertical power and restructured Russia's federal composition. One bill aimed at replacing elected members of the upper house of parliament with appointed ones. Another bill allowed elected governors to be removed from office on mere suspicion of wrongdoing. And another established seven presidential envoys, who were generals and former KGB officers to supervise the work of elected governors in large territories in the country (Gessen 2012). Russian governors and other regional lords, many of whom ran almost independent fiefs under Putin's predecessor, now looked to Moscow in a servile fashion. Regional leaders under Yeltsin used to rule over their provinces like little tsars, either paying no attention to the Kremlin or blackmailing the Moscow courtiers and the president himself (Shevtsova 2003).

While Yeltsin's Russia was controlled by oligarchs who ran the failing economy to their benefit, Putin's Russia instilled fear in the oligarchs and moved their money and their families abroad while keeping a low profile. Only Berezovsky, one of those who orchestrated Putin's ascent, desperately tried to build an opposition to challenge the new Kremlin

boss (Shevtsova 2003). Putin monopolized the gas company Gazprom and possessed full control over it, as it became an instrument of political patronage and punishment (Goldman 2008). The richest man in the country, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was the head of the giant oil company Yukos and frequently challenged the government and financed the opposition. Putin made sure to remove the threat he posed by arresting him and imprisoning him for tax fraud and other crimes. His company was sold off to various Kremlin-controlled companies (Rutland 2006). Putin took control of the previously oligarch-controlled media by forcing Boris Berezovsky into exile on fraud charges. He had been the owner of ORT, a station that would air critical coverage of the government. Additionally, the Kremlin took over NTV, owned by Vladimir Gusinsky, also critical of the government, and later took over his TV6 in 2007 leaving Russia without independent television (Ostrow et al. 2007).

Putin consolidated the 89 provinces which became a few regional districts where regional parties were barred from parliamentary elections, and lobbying powers for regional interests were reduced in the legislative chamber (Sakwa 2017). He strengthened United Russia, which absorbed the OVR and became an institutionalized political party and effectively eliminated parliament as a site for opposition (Gelman 2008, pp. 913–930). The strength of UR allowed it to become the dominant force in the duma and effectively ended the independence of legislative power from executive power (Kryshtanovskaya 2005). The best-organized opposition party, the KPRF, also saw noticeable decline in public support, which dramatically shifted the domestic balance of power (Clark 2006, pp. 15–25). The opposition was then completely stifled as independent media, regional powers and oligarchic powers were weakened.

In 2003, United Russia won 223 out of 450 seats, which when combined with small allied parties and independents, gave Putin a two-thirds majority. Opposition was destroyed after 2003. When the 2004 presidential election approached, major candidates opted not to run. Putin was overwhelmingly reelected with 71% of the vote in 2004, facing only minor opposition (Gelman 2007). During Putin's second term, the regime became increasingly authoritarian. Putin placed barriers to creating political parties and formed a law that eliminated elections for regional governors (Remington 2008, pp. 959–987). Additionally, harsh restrictions were imposed on NGOs, censorship became more abundant, and many acts of violence were observed on journalists, which made Russia one of the most unsafe places for the media (Freedom in the World—Russia 2016).

The electoral culture in Russia consisted of formally free elections that were orchestrated by local authorities trying to curry favor with the federal center. The March 2004 elections were a perfect example of this. Putin technically had 5 opponents running against him, but the obstacles they had to overcome to even join the race were quite extreme. International organizations had observed numerous violations in Russia's election processes such as deleting from the rolls of over a million elderly people and unlikely voters and the delivery of prefilled ballots to a psychiatric ward. During the campaign, opposition candidates faced difficulty printing their campaign material or airing their commercials or even finding space for campaign events. In the end, Putin received about seven times as much news coverage on the state channel as other candidates.

After the 2004 hostage crisis in Beslan, Putin gave a speech and emphasized the need for government effectiveness in combating terrorism and uniting the country as the main conditions for success in this fight. He declared that from that point on, governors would no longer be elected, he would appoint the mayor of Moscow himself, and members of the lower house of parliament would no longer be directly elected. Now Russian citizens would cast their votes in favor of political parties rather than individual candidates, who would then fill the seats with party members. The new procedure for registering political parties became more complex, and all existing ones had to re-register which led to most being eliminated as a result. Legislation was also passed that would filter all bills before entering the lower house through a public chamber that the president would personally appoint. This was certainly not the first time that Putin had used acts of terror as an excuse to increasingly centralize the country (Gessen 2012). Putin spoke of reform in Western capitals, but at home, he was destroying any element left of liberal-democratic society. He got rid of any remaining independent media, as he found it to be a strong tool of social manipulation. He took on civil society and organizations over which he did not have any control, registered the ones who engaged in criticism over the Russian regime as "foreign agents" and shut down several of them (Tetrault-Farber 2014).

The former KGB was now in a place to control the country, only now it was in a better funded and more sophisticated guise. Russia is ruled by a system of networks based on personal loyalty and an informal exchange of information and resources. The most influential groups are formed in strategic sectors of the economy such as the energy sector and the military. There is a symbiosis in Russia between these informal groups and

the formal institutions of the state. Their special interests are greatly taken into consideration and they are unaccountable for their actions. Yet this system has remained surprisingly sustainable. Through Putin's centralization of power and network, he has managed to provide stability and order in Russia as well as a loyal elite, making the authorities less prone to internecine fighting. This arrangement was extended to Chechnya where free reign and extraordinary monetary subsidies were given to a handpicked young Chechen leader named Ramzan Kadyrov in exchange for loyalty. After Putin's second term, the narrative on Russia's regime began to change in international media from "emerging democracy" to "authoritarian tendencies" to giving off impressions of criminal tyranny. In 2003, Transparency International ranked Russia as more corrupt than 64% of the world's countries, comparing it with countries such as Mozambique and Algeria. In its 2010 report, the organization showed Russia as more corrupt than 86% of the world (Transparency International 2010). In 2005, the presidential representative to the G8, Andrey Illiariionov, resigned due to his problems with Russia becoming less democratic and free and being run by an authoritarian elite (BBC 2005).

Elections became increasingly uncompetitive as evidenced by the 2008 elections with Putin's orchestration of a successor, a move that would technically abide by constitutional law yet would allow him to retain power. After the 2007 Duma elections, Putin announced his support for Dmitri Medvedev to succeed him, while Medvedev announced he would make Putin the Prime Minister. This staged transition was legal, but clearly did not change the balance of power in Russia. In 2008, in an election conducted with media bias and manipulation, Medvedev won with 70% of the vote (Faulconbridge and Tsvetkova 2012). The plan was for Medvedev to preside over his four-year term and then cede the throne to Putin, for two consecutive six-year terms. Every year, Russia slid lower and lower on the Corruption Perception Index, reaching 154th out of 189 by 2011 (Transparency International 2017).

SECURITY AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF CORRUPTION

During Soviet times, crime never gained enough strength to compete with the state's law enforcement system. Criminal ties with the police were kept hidden and money did not have as much influence as it did later. Laundering money was challenging and so was spending money

(Gustafson 1999, pp. 135–136). However, during the late 1980s, crime rates sharply increased, as the fall of the USSR was approaching. The end of Marxist–Leninist governments in this region had a large impact on the political economy of organized crime (Harris 2003, p. 165). Political instability and economic instability resulted in a breakdown of law and order and certain standards of living for the population in Russia. The transition to a free market economy led to falling production and huge capital flight and low foreign investment (Hughes 2014). The poverty that resulted led to more theft and counterfeiting and the rise of organized crime groups engaging in human trafficking, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, money laundering and car theft (Siegel 2011). Transnational organized crime took off in the early 1990s in Russia and increased the number of crimes especially in the realms of theft, burglary and property crimes. In addition, there was a rapid growth in violent crime including homicides (Russian State Statistics 2017). Due to the collapse of the state, the law enforcement system was no longer in place as it had previously been and was therefore unable to stop lawlessness at such a rapid rate.

In 1990, there were more than 1.84 million registered crimes in Russia. In 1993, there were 2.8 million. In 1999, there were 3 million. These figures increased until the year 2002 and then began to fall (Weiler 2004, p. 35). In 1995, swindling increased by 67.2%, extortion by 37.5%, homicide by 1.5%, rape by 6.5% and burglaries by 6.6% (Library of Congress 2017). Many of the homicides that took place in Russia in 1994 were contract killings by organized crime groups. In 1994, the number of organized crime groups in the former USSR grew from 785 under Gorbachev’s leadership to 5691 according to the interior ministry (BBC 1998). By 1996, this number had reached 8000 groups holding between 50 and 1000 members. In 1998, the government of Russia estimated that the mafia controlled 40% of private business and 60% of state-owned companies while unofficial sources say 80% of banks in Russia were controlled directly or indirectly by criminals. In 1998, it was estimated that around 25 billion US dollars of dirty Russian money had left the country since the fall of Communism and mostly laundered in Switzerland, Lichtenstein, and Cyprus (BBC 1998). In addition, many Russian gangsters claiming to be of Jewish origin tried to claim Israeli passports and had poured over 4 billion dollars into Israel by 1998 (BBC 1998). In Russia itself, the mafia was discouraging foreign investment. The German interior minister even claimed that in the 1990s, foreign companies based in Russia would pay up to 20% of their profits to

the mafia (BBC 1998). In 1998, the statistics showed that Russia saw around 10,000 fatal shootings a year, 600 of which were contract killings (BBC 1998). Assassins targeted businessmen, politicians, journalists, and Afghan war veterans among others. During the 1990s, Russia was fighting a losing battle against the mafia. During this time, Russia found itself in a crisis of state authority that nurtured the expansion of organized crime, as it filled every state and non-state void. Laws were not properly enforced, and criminals acted with impunity. Organized crime bosses and their contacts from the Soviet era helped create the powerful oligarch class in Russia's post-Soviet era. These oligarchs consisted of former politicians, former criminals, and well-connected businessmen.

The rate of murder in Russia has varied over time. In the 1950s and 1960s, the murder rate remained stable and was actually lower than that of the USA (Pridemore 2007, p. 121). In the 1990s and throughout the next decade, homicide rates in Russia began to rise rapidly and were among the highest in the world (Pridemore 2003, p. 1343). The following graph demonstrates the murder rates from 1991 to 2011. As of 2002, one can notice a stable downward trend (Weiler 2004, p. 36) (Fig. 2.2).



Fig. 2.2 Total homicides 1991–2011

By the time Putin entered politics in 1999, organized crime and the oligarchs posed a serious threat to the Russian state because it became the most stable institution in the country since the state was so ineffective at enforcing laws and providing security. State assets such as energy, minerals, telecommunications, and transport networks had all become under the control of the oligarchs which tipped the power balance away from the state and toward private businessmen. When Putin came into power, his goal was to re-assert that balance and diminish the hold of the oligarch's over state resources (Stratford World View 2008). His strategy was to adopt a vertical integration of criminals. He imposed a new social contract with the underworld. Gangsters could still be gangsters as long as they respected the authority of the state. Indiscriminate street violence was replaced by targeted assassinations. This was not just a process of setting new boundaries for the criminals; it also led to a restructuring of connections between the underworld and the "upperworld," to the benefit of the latter.

It has been argued by influential journalists that Putin came to power through the secret-police apparatus which formed him and continues to sustain him. Putin turned Russia into a "supersized model of the KGB" where there is no room for dissent or even independent action. In these ways, he has seized power back into the hands of the state. The modern version of the KGB, the FSB, both absorbs and eliminates organized crime and the Russian mafia through killing or imprisoning those who do not comply to eliminate any competition for power and influence (Stratford World View 2008). Russian criminals make extensive use of the state governmental apparatus to protect and promote their criminal activities. For example, most businesses in Russia, whether legal or illegal, must operate with the protection of a *krysha* (roof). The protection is often provided by police or security officials employed outside their "official" capacities for this purpose. In other cases, officials are "silent partners" in criminal enterprises that they, in turn, protect (Global Security 2017). Leaked secret diplomatic cables have deduced that Russia is a corrupt, autocratic kleptocracy where government officials, oligarchs, and organized crime are bound together under the leadership of Vladimir Putin in a "virtual mafia state" (Harding 2010). The bribe system works in a vertical line where the Kremlin holds the seat at the summit, then a broad layer of top officials such as mayors and governors collect money based on bribes almost like their own personal taxation

system. At the next level down is the FSB, interior ministry and police, who collect money from illicit and licit businesses.

Many officers were relieved to hear that Putin would replace Medvedev as president in 2012 because Putin espouses the same beliefs that they all share: gut-level nationalism, a technocratic order of society and the sense that the masses just ought to let the elites run the country (Arutunyan 2014). Though it was no longer the centralized KGB of the USSR, FSB preserved a certain bureaucratic ideology that revered the Bolshevik *Cheka* secret police and maintained a cult-like devotion to the founder Feliks Dzerzhinsky (Waller 1994, pp. 35–58). Also known as the *chekists*, the former KGB apparatus in governing roles are thought to prefer a strong, independent, centralized and militarily strong Russia. They are believed to have a tendency to uphold Russian exceptionalism and civilizational uniqueness. Moreover, the anti-Western sentiment observed becomes an end itself, serving to preserve and exalt Russian civilization (Tucek 2016). As many as a quarter of Russia's senior bureaucrats are "*siloviki*," Russian for "power guys." The *siloviki* represent a group of people that are loyal to the *Cheka*. Mr. Putin often states, "there is no such thing as a former Chekist" (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2003). All important decisions in Russia are taken by a small circle of men who served alongside Putin during the KGB era in St. Petersburg. Of all the Soviet institutions, the KGB has withstood Russia's transformation to capitalism the best. A member of parliament, Mr. Kondaurov, stated "Communist ideology has gone, but the methods and psychology of its secret police have remained" (*The Economist*, 2007). Putin's informal politburo includes two deputy heads of the presidential administration, Igor Sechin and Viktor Ivanov; Nikolai Patrushev head of FSB; and Sergei Ivanov first deputy prime minister. These men are all from St. Petersburg and worked in intelligence alongside Putin. The *siloviki*'s power is backed by their enormous financial resources in state companies. For example, Mr. Sechin is the chairman of Rosneft, the largest state-run oil company in Russia. Viktor Ivanov is head of the board of Almaz Antei, the country's main production of air defense rockets and of Aeroflot, the national airline. The *siloviki* can also be found in law enforcement agencies, in the ministries of the economy, transport, natural resources, telecoms, and culture. KGB veterans hold senior management positions in Gazprom, Russia's biggest company, and Gazprom Bank, where the Vice President is Sergei Ivanov's son. The FSB even

has support from the priesthood. Next to the FSB building in Lubyanka Square, stands the church of the Holy Wisdom. A Plaque on the church states “restored in August 2001 with zealous help from the FSB.” “Thank God there is the FSB. All power is from God and so is theirs,” quoting Father Alexander, who leads the service (*The Economist*, 2007).

FOREIGN POLICY

In October 1990, Andrey Kozyrev was appointed foreign minister of the Russian Federation. Kozyrev worked alongside Yegor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais and shared their Western liberal-democratic ideals. Kozyrev’s objectives involved a rapprochement with the West (Rutland and Dubinsky 2008). He promoted cooperation with the USA, arms control agreements and nonproliferation treaties (Sestanovich 1994, p. 24). His reputation was to be an important voice for liberalism and democracy in Russia and oppose the conservative, anti-Western nationalistic forces within Russia. Eventually, however, Kozyrev was blamed for international controversy over the conflict in Chechnya and for failing to stop the NATO bombing of the Bosnian Serbs and of NATO plans to expand into Eastern Europe (Parker 2009). He was also criticized by the Russian State Duma for yielding to the West and being responsible for Russia’s loss of its “Great Power Status.” He was succeeded by Evgeniy Primakov.

Primakov had served as Minister of Foreign Affairs from January 1996 until September 1998. Throughout his time as foreign minister, he gained respect at home and abroad building a reputation as a tough but pragmatic supporter of Russia’s interests and as an opponent of NATO’s expansion into the former Eastern bloc (Quinn 1998). The significance of selecting Primakov as Prime Minister was that his views on foreign policy were quite different from those of Yeltsin in that they were more “Eurasianist,” or in other words, more geared toward Russia’s interests in the near abroad. His foreign policy vision was very popular in Russia, while Yeltsin’s was not. He was also famously an advocate of multilateralism as an alternative to American global hegemony following the collapse of the USSR and promoted the formation of a strategic triangle between Russia, China, and India to counterbalance the USA (Gabashvili 2013). The move was interpreted by some observers as an agreement to fight together against what would later be termed “color revolutions” in Central Asia (Chandra 2010), or strong political movements promoting

reforms toward a system more similar to a Western liberal democracy. Primakov differed from Yeltsin in his domestic policy as well and was given credit for some very difficult reforms in Russia such as a tax reform that became majorly successful (Aslund 2008).

Though Primakov's policy of countering American unilateralism was popular in Russia, it did, however, lead to a breach with the West during the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and left Russia isolated throughout the development of the conflict as Russia strongly disagreed with Western actions (Tsygankov 2016, pp. 108–113). Even though NATO assured it would be a purely defensive organization, it launched a 78-day bombing campaign in Yugoslavia to force its regime to grant autonomy to the Albanian majority in its Kosovo province. This war was very unpopular among Russians and led to many anti-American protests. However, Yeltsin was not in a very good position to defy the West and backed down from outright confrontation in this conflict due to his need for economic concessions (Donaldson 2000). Siding with Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was not in Russia's economic interest on the long run as this would thwart liberal reforms. Ultimately, Russians were against the campaign but could not do anything about it as it would precipitate a strong anti-Russian response in the West. This event nevertheless skyrocketed anti-American sentiment in Russia. According to some polls, 90% of the Russian population believed that the NATO bombing campaign was a mistake, while 65% believed that NATO was the aggressor in the conflict (Donaldson 2000).

Yeltsin fired Primakov on May 12, 1999, using the sluggish pace of the Russian economy as a pretext, which many analysts perceived to be just an excuse. Rather, they believed the firing of Primakov was done out of Yeltsin's fear of losing power to a more successful and popular person (*The Wall Street Journal*, 1999). Primakov's dismissal was extremely unpopular among Russians as 81% of the population disapproved (McFaul 2000, pp. 42–47, 50–58). This indicates that Primakov's tough stance against the West was popular in Russia and the population approved of his policies to prioritize Russian interests and identity, unlike Yeltsin and much like Putin, demonstrating the importance of national pride for Russians. At the time, Yeltsin's health was deteriorating, his popular support was running low and he lacked a strong party platform. This is when Yeltsin surprised many by naming his intelligence chief, the unknown Vladimir Putin, as Prime Minister and designated successor.

Foreign policy in Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union was not clearly defined as various constituents within government had different sets of beliefs. Nevertheless, since Russia was a “democratizing” country, its foreign policy actions took place in a pluralistic system that included debates, political struggle, electoral politics, and lobbying. Four distinct groups that existed in the Russian government in the 1990s can be described as the “Pro-Western Idealists,” the “Pro-Western Pragmatists,” the “Anti-Western Pragmatists” and the “Anti-Western Ideologues” (McFaul 1999). Though each group differed in its attitude toward the West, there were certain key issues that all actors could agree on such as the fact that Russia at this time was a declining power with a very weak economy. The priority of all groups was therefore to improve Russia’s situation internally before it could fulfill its desire to be a significant player internationally. Russia’s position in the world at this time could be categorized as a secondary observer due to its domestic inefficiencies. The most significant moment when this was made apparent was NATO’s campaign against Yugoslavia. Another common ground between the various government factions was the economic, political and military cooperation with the CIS to establish a “Russian sphere of influence” in the near abroad. Most constituents were therefore tacitly against NATO expansion eastward. Additionally, maintaining its nuclear weapons stockpile was also a common objective as it granted Russia special power in the international system.

After being disillusioned by the West, Western liberal ideas lost primacy in Russia. Pro-Western pragmatism became more dominant as special interest groups and businessmen began to assert their influence on foreign policy matters as they maximized their wealth through Western cooperation. Access to Western markets and goods was necessary for businessmen as were partnerships with Western capitals in banking. Therefore, foreign policy took a turn and was motivated primarily by the Russian capitalist class who benefited the most from privatization. The interests of these oligarchs were purely financial, so much that when issues of NATO expansion threatened their business interests abroad, the coalition of liberals within the government and their allies in Russia’s economic society cooperated to sustain engagement. The anti-Western pragmatists viewed relations with the West as a zero-sum game. The principal foreign policy objective for these power-balancers was to weaken the US and NATO and transform the unipolar international system into a multipolar system where Russia would be a pole. However, for pragmatic reasons, the

anti-Western pragmatists were aware that they needed Western financial assistance to achieve their first objective before they could attempt to achieve the others. The chief proponent of this perspective was Evgeniy Primakov. The anti-Western ideologues were a group possessing a passionately anti-Western ideology based on more ethnic and civilizationist concerns rather than material ones. Defending the Slavic nations of the world from NATO aggression was a primary objective. Vladimir Zhirinovksy and his liberal-democratic party was the most well-known political group in Russia that espoused such beliefs as well as a few other groups, but they made up the smallest and weakest lobby when it came to the actual decision making of foreign policy.

In Putin's government, the elite is composed of people having an exaggerated sense of the enemy which justifies their very existence. "A few years ago, we succumbed to the illusion that we don't have enemies and we have paid dearly for that," Mr. Putin told the FSB in 1999 (*The Economist*, 2007). This anti-Westernism has worked among the Russian public. Mr. Goloshchapov, the FSB's spokesman, stated "In Gorbachev's time Russia was liked by the West and what did we get for it? We have surrendered everything: Eastern Europe, Ukraine, Georgia. NATO has moved to our borders" (*The Economist*, 2007). Thus, all those who side with the West are considered the internal enemy including the last free-thinking journalists, the last NGOs and the last liberal politicians (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2003). When Putin first became president, his foreign policy could be characterized as mistrustful toward the West. This sentiment stemmed from the West's role in the CIS and the uncertainty of the future of Baltic countries as well as energy route disagreements and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). Meanwhile, Putin was cultivating relationships with countries particularly concerning to the West such as China, Cuba, North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. Putin criticized the West for its plans to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and its plan to build a national missile defense system. He also criticized US military intervention in Yugoslavia and NATO talks to expand to Eastern Europe (Spechler 2010, pp. 35–50). After the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA though, relations shifted into a more cooperative phase. Putin immediately declared his full support to the West with the war on terror. In addition, Putin reconsidered his stance on NATO expansion and even considered joining it as a member state (Spechler 2010, pp. 35–50). This cooperative relationship was short-lived though. When the US announced its plan to go to war with

Iraq, Putin opposed this mission entirely and said Russia would veto any UN security council resolution that would authorize the use of force against Saddam Hussein. Once again, relations between the US and Russian soured.

Relations became outright hostile as Putin extended his anti-Western stance to including the European Union and NATO. The Baltic countries became a contentious issue as Russia claimed it would be forced to retaliate if NATO expanded to that region. Putin stated that the Color Revolutions that began in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan were part of a Western plot to install Western-friendly regimes to surround Russia and eventually bring about regime change. He accused the West of using human rights and pro-democracy NGOs as instruments to channel funds to influence Russian politics. In order to eliminate Western presence in the CIS, Putin implemented gas price manipulations so that if any country had relations with the West, Russia would threaten to increase the price of gas. Such was the case in Ukraine when Russia increased the price dramatically and cut off the gas supply twice when Ukraine had trouble paying the bills. Georgia was targeted militarily when it declared its intention to join NATO, and Russian military relations with China and pro-Russian regimes then intensified (Spechler 2010, pp. 35–50). Plans for NATO membership in Georgia were then put on hold. Ukraine and Georgia are of supreme importance for Russia and its “lost imperial past” and would constitute a great loss were they ever to integrate into European institutions (Larive and Kanet 2012). Putin sees NATO expansion as a zero-sum game, a win for them is a loss for Russia and the regional balance of power. NATO represents a direct challenge to Putin and his nationalist policies (Loftus and Kanet 2015, pp. 15–41). This evidence of increasing assertiveness in foreign policy was noted as Russia saw an improvement in its economic capacity and domestic situation. The growth of the economy after 2000 made it possible for Putin to pay foreign debts on time and to free Moscow from the huge infusions of foreign financial assistance from the IMF, the USA, and other major bilateral lenders that it had required throughout the 1990s (Hill 2006) and further impose central political control. Putin was able to exhibit more political influence in the CIS and turned into an “economic magnet” for these states (Trenin 2004).

Russia believes it has a sphere of influence and should maintain influence over that sphere whereas the West believes these countries are completely independent and have the right to choose their policy orientation.

After many years under Soviet Communism, these states tended to remain strongly influenced by their past and adopted authoritarian structures with weak rule of law and a paternalistic system of governance. With time though, some countries started to rebel against the lack of democracy and wanted to move closer to Europe. The revolutions occurred in response to fraudulent elections where the incumbent had limited support and was overthrown by the rebellion. Western-oriented leaders then replaced them. Putin viewed Western encouragement of these revolutions as a threat to his influence in post-Soviet Russia (Stent 2014). In addition, the EU's Neighborhood Policy has sought closer ties with countries to the East. Former USSR states joined in order to integrate with Europe and eventually become a member of the EU. The EU has offered financial assistance to these countries as long as they abide by certain political and economic ways of life. Russia views this initiative as a plan to expand Western values into its sphere of influence. Post-Cold War actions taken by the West such as the Partnership for Peace program between former Soviet states and NATO and the push for the development of energy pipelines that bypassed Russia demonstrated to Russia the West's desire to minimize Russian influence in Europe (Kanet 2015, pp. 503–522).

These revolutions deeply disturbed Putin and his administration and appeared to be connected as they occurred one after the other. Success in a nearby state resulted in others being inspired to rebel against their own authoritarian regimes. This process is referred to as “diffusion” among democratization scholars and intensifies pressure on other authoritarian regimes nearby. Once established, democratic regimes are inclined to export their ideas to like-minded groups in authoritarian states through NGOS with the assistance of established democracies such as the USA. Diffusion is therefore an extreme threat to authoritarian regimes' national security (Ambrosio 2007, p. 232). The Kremlin implemented three strategies to avoid this democratic trend after the Color Revolutions. These were to insulate, bolster and subvert. The Kremlin attempted to insulate itself from democracy by using authoritarian resistance; bolster itself by supporting authoritarianism elsewhere such as in Belarus; and subvert through rhetorical and foreign policy aggression against Ukraine (Ambrosio 2007, p. 234). The Kremlin chose to increase its efforts of authoritarian resistance to restore centralized control over the state and society and did this through regulating NGOS, channeling the political activism of the youth, directly managing

elections and rigorously restricting foreign election monitors (Wilson 2010, pp. 21–23). The Color Revolutions are the symbolic “cutoff” for Putin’s willingness to cooperate with the West. And while Medvedev was president for 4 years and did not necessarily depict this, as soon as Putin came back into office, non-cooperation was the primary strategy employed toward the West.

Putin came to office with the idea of remaking Russia and re-establishing it as an important international actor. His actions did not demonstrate a commitment to democracy or the rule of law but, nevertheless, demonstrated effective government control. At the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin presented an attack on the US and the West and announced that it was back as a major international actor and would not follow the lead of the West in terms of security and foreign policy issues. He also stated that Russia saw itself as being in conflict with the West. Russia asserted that it was not bound by the Western definition of democracy and that it was establishing a “sovereign democracy” that would be independent from external influence. Petrov and McFaul’s definition of “sovereign democracy” is a strong state presidency coupled with weak institutions, state control over the media, control over elections, short-term effectiveness and long-term inefficiency (Petrov and McFaul 2005, pp. 507–549). The establishment of a “sovereign democracy” in Putin’s terms is in direct confrontation with the ideas and values that the West has been trying to diffuse and serves as a demonstration that Russia is unique and just as legitimate as the USA or Europe (Stent 2014, pp. 142–143). The stronger Russia became economically, the bolder it became internationally and the more it could assert its determination to have a different form of governance that is just as legitimate as a Western democracy.

Today one can argue that Russia’s foreign policy is assertive and anti-Western, however, this was not a sudden change but rather the culmination of several disappointments to Russia. In Putin’s second term, his foreign policy was already outright hostile toward the West. When Putin saw that the West would not accept Russia as its equal, it adopted a more assertive approach to its foreign policy. As Russia’s aspirations were always to return to having great power status, not being considered an “equal” affected its national self-esteem. When Putin began acting more assertively toward the West, he earned respect from the population, who had been tired of being diminished to a lesser power internationally.

YELTSIN VS PUTIN'S APPROVAL RATINGS

Boris Yeltsin started out extremely popular, with 81% of Russians approving of his performance in September 1991. By the time he left office eight years later, that proportion had dropped to 8% (Treisman 2011, p. 590). Figure 2.3 from the Levada Center is an opinion poll on the Boris Yeltsin era in Russia.

Figure 2.4 compares Yeltsin, Stalin, and Putin from a likeability, fear, fondness, respect, revulsion and indifference standpoint. As one can see, Yeltsin garnered little respect, quite a lot of dislike and more than enough revulsion compared with Putin and Stalin (The Levada Center 2017).

The most common reasons for disliking Yeltsin were corruption and failure to lead the country (The Levada Center 2017) (Fig. 2.5).

And this chart shows that people were mostly satisfied by his resignation (The Levada Center 2017) (Fig. 2.6).

These charts have demonstrated public opinion on Boris Yeltsin's leadership. Russians expressed dissatisfaction with his leadership for the

	More good	More bad	It is difficult to say
Dec.15	18	56	26
Apr.13	14	66	20
Dec.11	18	63	19
Dec.10	20	59	22
Dec.09	17	63	20
Dec.07	19	58	23
May.07	26	47	27
Dec.06	15	64	21
Dec.05	13	70	17
Dec.04	16	69	15
Feb.03	13	71	16
Dec.02	14	69	17
Dec.01	15	67	18
Jun.01	17	66	17
Dec.00	15	75	11
Jan.00	15	67	18

Fig. 2.3 Yeltsin's popularity (The Levada Center, April 5, 2016, *From a historical perspective, did the Yeltsin era, in your opinion, bring Russia more good or bad?*)

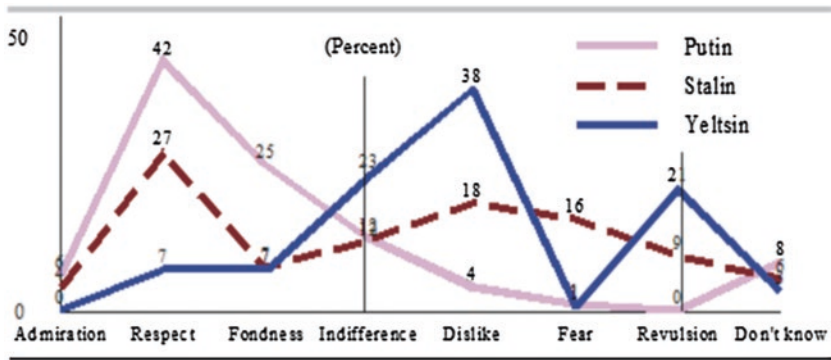


Fig. 2.4 Popularity of Russian leaders (The Levada Center, August 12, 2015, *What is your general attitude toward a) Putin b) Stalin c) Yeltsin*. Source Nationwide VCIOM Survey, April 20–23, 2001, N = 1600)

Q12. What don't you like about Boris Yeltsin? (Responses attracting at least 5%)

	All replies
	%
Surrounded by corruption, bribery, abuses	50
Failed to lead the country	47
Doesn't understand the needs of the people	18
Not respected by people around me	16
Not a far sighted politician	12
Incapable of taking charge of people	12
Insincere person	11
No clear political line	9
Weak, indecisive	8
No bright political qualities	8
Unprincipled person	6
Ugly, bad-looking	5
Other	11
Don't know	9

Fig. 2.5 Reasons for disliking Yeltsin (The Levada Center, August 12, 2015, *What don't you like about Boris Yeltsin?* Source Nationwide VCIOM Survey, January 8–10, 1999, N = 1600)

way politics unraveled, crime exploded, the economy plummeted, foreign policy was decided, and the way a lack of centralization and cohesion encouraged corruption among non-state actors, who appeared to control much of the political decisions. Yeltsin's reputation for Russians became that of a leader who did not prioritize the interests of the state but rather conceded to the wishes of the West and the wealthy—a characteristic that can be described as self-interested and lacking national pride.

	All replies	%
Satisfaction		51
Surprise		27
Delight		11
Incomprehension		6
Alarm		4
Regret		4
Indignation		1
No particular feelings		12
Don't know		1

Fig. 2.6 Feelings on Yeltsin's resignation (The Levada Center, April 5, 2016, *What were your feelings about the news of Boris Yeltsin's resignation from the post of President of the Russian Federation?* Source Nationwide VCIOM Survey, January 8–10, 2000, $N = 1600$)

Putin's style of leadership, on the other hand, is based on authoritarian tendencies, crushing dissidence and repressing civil rights and political liberties. Many would conclude that the majority of the population in Russia would be dissatisfied with the status quo. However, despite the presence of a small opposition, the majority of citizens actually approve of Vladimir Putin. The Levada Center states that Putin's approval ratings reached 81% in June 2007, which placed him at the highest level of support of any leader in the world (Madslien 2007). Putin's popularity rose from 31% in August 1999 to 80% in November 1999, never dropping below 65% during his first presidency (The Levada Center 2007). Another poll by the Levada Center around June–July 2006 stated that "Russians generally support Putin's concentration of political power and strongly support the re-nationalization of Russia's oil and gas industry" (Levada Center 2017). A 2005 survey showed that three times as many Russians felt the country was "more democratic" under Putin than it was during the Yeltsin or Gorbachev years, and the same proportion thought human rights were more respected under Putin than under Yeltsin (Petrov 2006). These survey responses show that democracy takes on another meaning for Russians, and that the presence of order and stability may represent greater levels of freedom. The graph below, derived from the Levada Center, demonstrates Vladimir Putin's approval ratings during his first two terms in office. One can see that the lowest they ever reached was 60% during his first year in power. The general trend that can be observed is positive approval ratings ranging from 60 to 85% (Fig. 2.7).

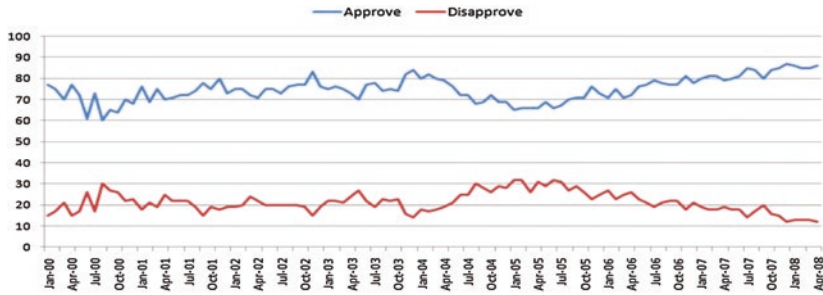


Fig. 2.7 Putin's approval ratings 2000–2008 (The Levada Center, 2013–2018, *Putin's approval rating*)

In addition to the Levada Center's demonstration of approval ratings, the Pew Global Attitudes Project in 2007 found strong and consistent public support for Putin throughout his two terms. According to their study, while the world may have viewed Putin's increased centralization of power and waning democratic tendencies as problematic, there was evidence that Russians did not share these same concerns. Surveys have demonstrated that Russians preferred a strong leader over a democratic government and a strong economy over a good democracy in order to solve Russia's problems. In 2007 more than 80% of Russians trusted Putin to do the right thing regarding world affairs, a confidence that applied across all ages and sexes (Pew Research Center 2008).

During his eight years in office, Putin maintained high approval ratings—the Levada center stated that more than 8 in 10 Russians approved of Putin's handling of the presidency in 2007. The Levada Center noted that this confidence even transferred to Putin's chosen successor Medvedev in 2008. Prior to Putin's endorsement for Medvedev, only 35% of Russians said they would vote for Medvedev in the upcoming election. However, once Putin endorsed him for the presidency, support jumped to 79% (Pew Research Center 2008).

The overall sensation of hope that was felt after the fall of the USSR for democratic reforms, market liberalization, and new freedoms was soon followed by hyperinflation, unemployment and a financial crisis. When Putin entered office, he rolled back on democratic rights, but there was solid economic growth. Russians' preference for a strong leader over a democratic government and a strong economy over a good democracy reflect both the political and economic uncertainty of

the 1990s, and the substantial GDP growth the country enjoyed during Putin's presidency (Pew Research Center 2008).

Interestingly, after the dissolution of the USSR, Russians did not believe to the extent that they did after the 1990s that a strong leader was more important than a democratic government. 50% believed in democracy when the USSR fell compared to 39% who believed in a strong leader. By 2002, the pattern had reversed to more Russians having faith in a strong leader than in a democratic government (Pew Research Center 2008), which is still the case today, as will be discussed in Chapter 3. According to the Pew Research Center, between 2002 and 2007, when Russians were asked which was more important, a good democracy or a strong economy, more than seven in ten chose a strong economy. This view is also shared by other countries in Eastern Europe.

ANALYTICAL CONCLUSIONS

During Yeltsin's tenure, elections were highly competitive and the legislature wielded considerable power. Private mass media channels such as Gusinsky's NTV regularly criticized Yeltsin and provided a platform for opposition (Troxel 2003). Though there was relative pluralism in the 1990's, many of Yeltsin's achievements in Russia were tainted by the corruption and political biases described earlier and strayed significantly from the democratic ideal. The internecine conflict that characterized the Yeltsin era and the struggles for power prevented the needed clarity and coherence in Russian foreign policy. Yeltsin failed to articulate his own clear and consistent vision of Russia's national interests or enforce order on his own government team to translate this vision into effective policy. He also allowed the private interests of business groups to gain more power than the state itself and failed to stand up to the West when it acted outside of Russia's interests due to his dependence on its economic and political support. These are all signs of "weak" leadership compared with Putin's or even Primakov's commitment to standing up to the West in the name of Russian interests and values. When Yeltsin suddenly resigned as president on December 31, 1999, his approval ratings at home had plummeted to an average of about 8% (Troxel 2003). Additionally, Yeltsin lost popularity among the international community with the exception of his friendship with Bill Clinton and a few others. Though electoral democracy was introduced into a country with a thousand-year history of autocratic rule, Yeltsin's performance left Russia

with a war underway in Chechnya, a manipulated parliamentary election, and rampant corruption preventing any chance of economic reform. It is no surprise that Russians had a negative view of Yeltsin and became skeptical of “democratizing.”

Russia during the time of Yeltsin was chaotic, economically unstable, politically decentralized, unsafe, highly corrupt, poorly managed and lacking a clear foreign policy vision based on Russian interests abroad. The indicators of this study demonstrate significant variation between Yeltsin’s time in office and Putin’s time. Consequently, approval ratings were very low for Yeltsin and very high for Putin. Yeltsin’s time in office provides an example of what Russia would be like without its identity as a “strong state.” This is what the Russian population appeared to be missing during the 1990s and was consequently very unsatisfied as the political opinion polls demonstrated. Russia under the political chaos of the 1990s can be analyzed using Huntington’s challenge of modernization theory. Huntington criticizes proponents of modernization theory who advocate that economic change and development lead to stable democratic societies and argues that modernization breeds disorder while modernity breeds stability. Due to the challenges of modernization, a society would be advised to apply a strong and centralized leadership to provide order and sustain reforms, as opposed to falling into the traps of instability, political indecision, stalemate, unclear leadership and objectives, and ultimately chaos (Huntington 1968). Putin arrived on the political scene with a voice that appeared to prioritize the very order that was lacking in Russia at the time and was perceived immediately as being a “strong leader,” the kind that Russia needed. It is important to consider that there may be prior needs to be fulfilled before a society can enjoy or even desire liberty.

Under Putin’s tenure, Russia’s Corruption Perception worsened as it became more authoritarian judging by Western standards of measurement. By tightening controls and undermining the integrity of elections, Russia’s network state became consolidated as the primary ruling system of the state. Though corrupt, there is a surprising sustainability to the way Putin governs Russia and a resulting stability, which is of supreme importance for a population that has experienced very negative consequences due to instability in the Yeltsin years and that has throughout a big portion of its history been exposed to authoritarian stability and great power status. Though Russia is ruled by a wealthy and corrupt elite whose main objective is to stay in power, and though Russia has taken a

sharp authoritarian turn over the years, there is strong cohesion among the ruling power, which is important for the stability of the regime. What is also important for the stability of the regime though is popular support, which Putin continues to have at exceptionally high levels.

The way Yeltsin ruled Russia and the chaotic environment that ensued as a result, demonstrated that a decentralized Russia resulted in the lack of order, cohesion, and security. The population of Russia disapproved of Yeltsin and now even fear returning to the “more liberal” 1990s as this decade is associated with instability. Moreover, the 1990s decade is associated with a sense of shame of no longer having a powerful identity in the world, abiding by the wishes of the West, and not standing up for Russian interests. When Primakov entered politics with his nationalist views, he gained an enormous support base which threatened Yeltsin, a president associated with “cowardice” in his incapacity to stand up to the West. When Putin entered the political arena, his tough rhetoric gained him an inordinate amount of success and popularity, showing that the population of Russia wanted a hard-line leader to impose order. Not only did Putin instill order, but thanks to a successful range of economic policies and rising energy prices, he also managed to turn the economy around and allow Russia to function better as a state and have more influence in the near and far abroad.

Michel Foucault suggested long ago that modern political power has less to do with domination and control and more to do with managing and manipulating. Commentators have since predicted the decline of the institutionalized, formal state, and the emergence of a more network-based arrangement in politics around the world (Kononenko 2011). Networks may actually represent a more effective form of governance than the top-down approaches of the traditional state. Russia is a state that combines both traditional statist approaches to power and its own network system in its governance (Kononenko 2011). Russia’s elite system of governance has also become part of the Russian state definition of its “sovereign democracy” and how the country is run, which has mostly resulted in an increasing amount of political stability and high levels of approval throughout the country. The political stability may be due to a variety of reasons, one being the elite cohesion of interests that results from Putin’s network. If all those in power share the same agenda, there is no reason for a split in the elite, which has been part of the cause of many revolutions throughout history (Skocpol 1979). Also, the authoritarian nature of the regime, which represses freedom

of speech and thought, has discouraged dissent throughout the country. Though anti-liberal and anti-democratic, this has also led to a certain form of stability, as there is no room for political debate. There exists a certain pragmatism about the Russian regime which helps to explain its long-lasting nature.

Post-Soviet countries under authoritarian leadership have viewed Putin's framework as relatively attractive. By the end of 2008, Russia had rebuilt its economy and had established economic power and influence over the Commonwealth of Independent States and post-Soviet space. Moscow believes that Russia's value system differs from that of the West and that different development models require different forms of governance (Medvedev 2008). Its self-identification as a "sovereign democracy" that is distinct from the West has created a platform on which all Putin's actions can be legitimized, including his aspirations of returning to a great power.

This study posits that Putin's elite ruling party, though corrupt and authoritarian, has provided stability in Russia and has managed to create a national image of the country as being strong and centralized, both in accordance with values of high national regard stretching back into Russian history. This "identity consolidation" begins at home and projects itself internationally as power consolidates domestically. In other words, the more centralized and consolidated Putin's rule became at home in terms of building a "strong state" in Russia, the bolder he became internationally and the more it appeared that Russia was returning to a "great power status." The next chapter demonstrates the extent to which this occurred in Putin third term.

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CHAPTER 3

Putin's Leadership 2012–2017

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

After having conceptualized both Yeltsin and Putin's leadership in Russia from the fall of the Soviet Union until 2008, this chapter illustrates how the domestic and international indicators used in this study affect levels of approval ratings for Vladimir Putin during his last term. It has been observed, that unlike Putin's previous terms, economic prosperity could not be used as an explanation for his high approval ratings, as Russia underwent a severe economic downturn in 2014 and approval ratings actually increased thereafter. It was also noted that increasing authoritarianism did not have a negative effect on approval ratings, which was a factor that was noted throughout all of his terms. However, an important distinguishing factor in his third term was the occurrence of mass protests remonstrating the lack of free and fair elections in Russia in 2011 and 2012, suggesting that the Russian population may have reached a point where they desired more freedoms. Interestingly though, after these protests, Vladimir Putin increased controls over society, actions that did not have negative repercussions on approval ratings, as the latter increased. Security levels remained constant and even improved in some areas, demonstrating continued correlation with that particular indicator. In terms of foreign policy, it was noted that increasing assertiveness was highly correlated with increased approval ratings. The annexation of Crimea specifically was responsible for the sudden spike in approval ratings. However, what was observed was not a mere spike, but a spike that

has stabilized for the last three years. Explaining this stability is the main focus of this study which argues that due to Vladimir Putin's creation of a stable, safer, more orderly society domestically, and due to his ability to recreate Russia as an influential actor internationally who prioritizes its national interests and stands up for its unique Eurasian identity in a Western-dominated world, the population of Russia not only adopts a "weathering the storm" attitude about the economic climate in Russia, but also riles around its leader to defend its proud national identity and the interests and objectives it has in the world today. Putin has consolidated Russia's identity both domestically in terms of its "sovereign democracy" and conservatism in society, as well as internationally as a conservative world power that defends the right of national sovereignty and emphasizes the role of civilization in the promotion of one's identity and foreign policy objectives.

This chapter mostly prioritizes the second aspect of the two-fold argument as it concerns Putin's last term and major foreign policy events and their importance in consolidating Russia's identity internationally. The previous chapter on Putin's first two terms mostly addresses the first aspect of the argument in terms of domestic consolidation of priorities. The way this chapter is organized is by indicators. The first section illustrates rising levels of authoritarianism, the second section addresses the economic downturn, the third section addresses security and security reforms, the fourth section addresses foreign policy events and changes and provides a discourse analysis of Russian media portrayals of these events, and finally a section on approval ratings and public perceptions is presented.

The protests in 2011–2012 demonstrated that opposition exists in Russia, as did the protests that took place in March 2017. This study argues that, although this opposition exists, the strength and capacity of this opposition is maintainable and will not result in system change for the foreseeable future due to Putin's overwhelming popularity. Shevtsova argues that the opposition will eventually lead Russia to great change but has so far not been able to mobilize properly. She states that personalized power has a long history in Russia and was still able to extend its life by assuming a new form in 1991, but that today, the bankruptcy of the Russian system has become evident, even to the ruling class. Although only a minority is willing to publicly stand up for change, the possibility of change hinges on the willingness of the majority to not object to it should it be presented to them. At this point, the elite is not ready to

make such a transition and is seeking ways to preserve the system that enriches them. In order for the population to be convinced that transitioning into a new system is better than maintaining the current system, she argues that an economic and social crisis would need to occur to induce a tipping point (Shevtsova 2013).

However, Russia did indeed undergo a significant economic crisis in 2014 which did not lead to this so-called tipping point where the population should be convinced that transitioning into a new system is better than maintaining the current one. In fact, the president never saw higher approval ratings. The findings of this study demonstrate a certain resilience of the Russian regime which has so far not undergone revolutions, as have some of its neighbors. The Arab Spring and the Color Revolutions are rebellions that took place in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe against authoritarian regimes where people protested against corruption and demanded more freedoms. Putin's high approval ratings demonstrate that the population is mostly content with his leadership, and any dissent or small-scale rebellions that have taken place in the country were not representative and were quickly quelled.

INCREASING AUTHORITARIANISM

Despite a clear rise in authoritarian tendencies during his last term, Putin's approval ratings spiked at an all-time high and remained high. Freedom House gave Russia a rating of 6.5 on their freedom index in 2016, higher than any other point in the 2000s (Freedom House 2017). Interestingly, as will be demonstrated, Russian poll respondents went as far as saying that the government protects their personal freedoms more than ten years ago and more than during the Yeltsin era (Simmons et al. 2015).

In 2011, Mikhail Prokhorov, the second richest man in Russia, was solicited by then president Medvedev and then prime minister Putin to oversee the creation of a new right liberal political party for the upcoming elections. This fit into a regular pattern established by the Kremlin whereby they would anoint one rightist party and one leftist party to be allowed on the ballot alongside United Russia to create a semblance of a competitive election (Gessen 2012). Real political parties and agendas were denied registration. However, Prokhorov took his job very seriously and was eventually locked out of his party's congress and received threatening messages about what would happen to him if he did not

drop the idea of being a politician (Schwartz 2011). During this election, Medvedev proposed that Putin run on behalf of United Russia and Putin offered Medvedev the candidacy for prime minister on behalf of United Russia in the parliamentary elections. Frustrated by the lack of choice in candidates and the reluctance of long presiding politicians to give up power, several thousands of Russian citizens took to the streets and protested. Russia saw some of the biggest protests it had seen since the 1990s. The protesters were protesting five main points; freedom for political prisoners; the annulment of the election results; the resignation of Vladimir Churov who was then head of the election commission; the opening of investigations of voter fraud; and the registration of opposition parties and new democratic legislation on parties and elections, as well as new democratic elections (Batty 2011). Many protesters were arrested including Alexei Navalny, Boris Nemtsov and Sergei Udaltsov, prominent political opposition leaders (*The Guardian* 2012). Gorbachev also called for a revote. Putin's approval ratings were the lowest they had ever been at this juncture, falling to an all-time low of 54% (Ray and Esipova 2014). The election itself was marred by accusations of unfair practice and lack of oversight. The OSCE observed the vote count negatively in almost one-third of polling stations due to procedural irregularities (Barry 2011). Ultimately, the 2012 presidential election had 5 official registered candidates running for a new term of 6 years. Putin won with 63.64% of the vote (Barry 2011).

As Putin took power for the third time, instead of granting the Russian citizens more civil rights and political liberties, Putin augmented authoritarian tendencies in the country after his victory. In June 2012, laws were enacted which set strict boundaries on protests and imposed heavy penalties for unauthorized actions (Barry 2013). The fine amounted to 300,000 rubles or about 9,000 dollars at the time, if one was caught protesting and up to one million rubles if one was caught as an organizer of an unsanctioned rally (Freedom House 2017). The number of public protests dropped by half in the following year, according to a report by Amnesty International (Boghani 2015). In 2014, Putin signed a law raising fines for protesters caught in unauthorized demonstrations several times in a year to between 600,000 and 1 million rubles or 17,124–28,540 dollars (Barry 2013). Protesters could also be held criminally accountable and face up to 5 years in jail or forced labor (Barry 2013). Opposition political commentator for radio station *Ekho Moskvy*, Victor Shenderovich, stated that the protests were not political

nor economic, but rather people were protesting the fact that they were humiliated because they were not even asked who they wanted to be their leader. They were simply told it would be Putin (Kramer 2011).

The humiliation is caused by the rising middle class and is the common ground the Russian movement shares with the Arab Spring, a rebellion movement that sprung in North Africa and the Middle East. The Arab Spring is largely believed to be caused by dissatisfaction among the youth with the rule of local government, and the aftermath of the Great Recession which worsened the gaps in income levels (The CenSEI Report 2012). Other theories include the confirmation of the US government's role in funding these uprisings (Nixon 2011). There were numerous causes for these protests including frustrations with dictatorship, human rights violations, political corruption, economic decline, unemployment, extreme poverty and an increasing percentage of educated yet dissatisfied youth (Kazamias 2011). Scholars have attempted to explain dissent through theories such as Relative Deprivation Theory which usually is a product of modernization (Billet 1993; Lange and Ruschemeyer 2005). Relative Deprivation is when an objective comparison can be made between the situation of an individual or group compared to the rest of society (Gurr 1970; Smith and Pettigrew 2015). Relative deprivation can also be about an individual experiencing discontent when being deprived of something to which he believes to be entitled to (Hull 2007). Though this phenomena most likely exists in Russia, it has certainly not demonstrated to be a cause for large-scale dissent or social revolutions. Any protests that took place in Russia were quickly quelled. This could be for a number of reasons such as lack of Western influence, state-controlled media, but also a popular leader, or the combination of the three. Putin has framed the Color Revolutions in Eastern Europe as being a product of Western influence, and for this reason, tries to block out Western influence as much as possible at home.

There are several reasons why Russia does not witness or experience as much dissent as some of its neighbors. Putin is determined to keep Western influence out so it cannot influence society through media, NGOs or through forms of relative deprivation with more Western countries who enjoy more freedoms and rights. Levitsky and Way argued that the reasons why certain countries democratized after the Cold War and others did not, had to do with the amount of Western leverage and the strength of their political parties. Where linkage to the

West was low, regime outcomes hinged on incumbents' organization power: where state and governing party structures were organized and cohesive, regimes remained stable and authoritarian, and where they were underdeveloped or lacked cohesion, they were unstable and rarely democratized (Levitsky and Way 2010). Due to Russia's military might and economic strength, Western influence in the region was blunted and Russia became the regional power. Russia, Belarus, and Armenia are examples of how low leverage and high organizational power contributed to authoritarian stability in the post-Cold War period. The relatively low organizational power in Russia in the early 1990s gave rise to a series of regimes crises. Under Putin 1999–2008, increased state and party capacity illuminated the instability of the 1990s, and the regime consolidated as it continued to be largely immune from outside pressure. In addition, Russia's massive oil and gas reserves and the rising energy prices of the 2000s ensured further reduced Western leverage (Levitsky and Way 2010). Due to rising energy prices, the strong economy in Russia allowed Putin to consolidate his regime and keep Western influence out. This allowed for a more stable and orderly environment, albeit with limited personal freedoms. Nevertheless, according to polls, Russians approve of their leader, suggesting that order and stability are more important than personal liberty, at least in the case of Russia.

Putin's crackdowns further included the signing of the "foreign agent law," which requires NGOs receiving funding from outside Russia to register as "foreign agents" and be subject to mandatory audits. Failure to register could result in a maximum fine of 300,000 rubles for individuals and 500,000 rubles for organizations (Boghani 2015). This law was cast as a way to prevent foreign meddling in Russia's domestic politics. The word "agent" has a double connotation as it also means a spy, and can therefore be interpreted as a way to demonize NGOs in the eyes of Russian citizens. In 2013, as many as 2000 NGOs were raided by government authorities (Boghani 2015). Among these was the election watchdog *Golos*, that tracked instances of fraud during the 2011 elections. It was fined for not having declared itself a foreign agent with at least ten others, who were taken to court.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, during his first two terms, Putin increased state control over the media and brought Gusinsky's and Berezovsky's television empires under Kremlin control. In 2014, several media outlets experienced editorial changes toward a more

Kremlin-friendly leader. Only one independent station remained, *Dozhd*, or rain, TV, which is considered a pariah channel and is located in a tiny studio in Moscow. The governmental pressure has resulted in a homogeneous domestic media that consistently reports the Kremlin's narrative. When independent international media reports from the USA or other Western countries undermined Putin's official narrative surrounding the Ukrainian conflict, he took swift action. In October 2014, the Duma passed a bill limiting foreign ownership of media assets to 20% (Birnbaum 2014). This law also prohibited international organizations, foreign citizens or Russians with dual citizenship from owning mass media outlets.

Before 2012, internet censorship in Russia was not common and the internet was considered an "island of freedom" in Russia's media landscape. However, in the months leading up to Putin's reelection, opposition forces used the internet to organize protests and expose alleged corruption. Within months, under the guise of protecting children and anti-terrorism, Putin signed a new legislation which gave the Russian government the ability to selectively block sites and prosecute their owners. Putin's administration frequently abuses the legislation to block criticism of the federal government, silencing those who challenge their nationalistic narrative. In December 2013, Putin signed another law to block sites that carry "extremists" content or promote mass rioting within 24 hours without a court order. Three opposition media led by Alexei Navalny were quickly blocked thereafter. Another law was signed that required bloggers with more than 3,000 daily visitors to register with a federal agency (Birnbaum 2014). Alexei Navalny wanted to counter Putin's grip on the media and used the internet to attack the government. He organized a series of large-scale demonstrations promoting democracy and attacking political corruption with his blog. Under the new laws, Navalny has been imprisoned and silenced various times and convicted on a variety of charges related to embezzlement and fraud.

Putin's statism and his reliance on bureaucracy demand a decrease in foreign influence for stability. Putin placed a ban on owning assets abroad and a requirement to declare any foreign property. Government workers cannot possess dual citizenship and are required to have only Russian citizenship. Any contact with foreigners must be reported to the state and government workers must ask for permission to go abroad. Interdependence with other nations is seen as a vulnerability in Russia today.

Putin has secured segments of the internet and legally demanded that all personal data on Russian citizens be kept on servers inside Russia only (Boghani 2015).

Political assassinations of dissidents have also taken place. Boris Yefimovich Nemtsov was a Russian liberal politician who had been an outspoken critic of Vladimir Putin. He was assassinated on 27 February 2015 on a bridge near the Kremlin in Moscow, with four shots fired from the back (Zimmerman 2015). Nemtsov criticized Putin's government as being increasingly authoritarian, undemocratic and accused it of embezzlement and profiteering in the Sochi Olympics. He also began to criticize Russian political interference and military involvement in Ukraine (Rosbalt 2015). Nemtsov was working on a report demonstrating that Russian troops were fighting alongside pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine, which the Kremlin had been denying. An open involvement would damage Putin's government not just externally, but also within Russia, where such policy has been shown by opinion polls to be highly unpopular (Birnbaum 2015). Nemtsov was an active organizer of and participant in civil actions and rallies for fair elections. In the weeks before his death, Nemtsov expressed fear that Putin would have him killed (*Sobesednik* 2015). Political assassinations as a result of journalists or politicians expressing dissent have occurred multiple times throughout Putin's reign. These include the assassinations of Sergei Yushenkov, Anna Politkovskaya, Alexandre Litvinenko, Yuri Shchekochikhin, Sergei Magnitsky, and Boris Berezovsky.

Putin has managed to construct an impressive propaganda machine that feeds its audience with a steady stream of pro-Russian news. The BBC recently argued that Putin's propaganda machine is even worse than it was under the Soviet Union (Kendall 2014). Using this machine, Putin has managed to create an extensive cult of personality, centered around a macho persona as a masculine, tough ex KGB agent who practices judo and enjoys flying fighter jets (Sean 2013). He is seen as strong and capable among Russians, and a reliable leader. Based on these new laws and on the fraudulent elections that had Putin reelected, it is evident that Putin has tightened authoritarian reigns in the country. One would expect popular discontent to rise, especially after dissent was expressed in 2011–2012 by a striving middle class. Instead, Putin's approval ratings shot up dramatically roughly two years after he retook office in the middle of an economic crisis, reaching 84% in 2014 (Ray and Esipova 2014).

ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

The economy performed very well during Putin's last two terms, but in 2014, the fall in oil prices had a dramatic effect on the economy. Nevertheless, Putin's approval ratings did not suffer as a result. The monetary system in Russia is managed by the Bank of Russia as of the breakup of the USSR. The Bank of Russia is technically an independent entity according to the Russian constitution, but is ran by a governor that was appointed by the President. Its main responsibilities include the protection of the stability of the national currency, being chief regulator, and a lender of last resort for the banking industry. The Russian Central Bank had planned to free float the Russian ruble, however, as soon as their plans were announced in 2013, the ruble fell significantly. In October of 2014, the USD-RUB exchange reached 40 rubles to 1 dollar, up from 32.19 rubles the same time the previous year, representing a decline of 24.26%. By 2015, it had reached 69 rubles to the dollar, and by 2016 it reached 78 rubles to the dollar where it peaked (XE Currency 2017). It has fallen back and stabilized to about 50 Rubles to the dollar in 2017 thanks to the intervention of the Russian Central Bank, which spent \$88 billion to stem the fall of the ruble, and to the slightly stronger oil prices (Tanas 2015). Inflation in Russia sharply increased and reached up to 17% in 2014, up from 3.6% in 2012, but is has now also decreased to slightly more than 4% in 2017 (Trading Economics 2017). The US, the EU, Canada and Japan also imposed sanctions on Russia's financial, energy and defense sectors in response to its annexation of Crimea, which has also contributed to Russia's economic troubles in recent years. Russia then responded with sanctions against a number of countries including food import bans from the EU and the USA (European Union News Room 2017). These actions are framed as Western aggression against Russia in Russian media, which further helps to mobilize the population into taking an anti-Western stance (Birnbaum 2015).

A quarter of the banks in Russia left the market during 2014–2015 (RBK 2016). However, Russia has a very low debt-to-GDP ratio and is among the lowest ratios in the world. Most of its external debt is private. Its debt-to-GDP ratio in 2016 was 12%. The cuts in government spending that have resulted from the drop in the price of oil have led to the decline in quality of life for ordinary Russian citizens. Real wages fell by an estimated 9% in 2015, the first dip since Putin came to power

in 2000, but has improved in the last year (Trading Economics 2017). GDP per capita fell to 9,057.11 USD in 2015 compared with 15,543.70 USD in 2013 (The World Bank 2017). More than two million people fell into poverty in 2015 (The World Bank 2017). Spending has dropped significantly as retail sales declined 13% in November 2015 (Trading Economics 2017) and foreign travel dipped by 25–30% (*The Moscow Times* 2015). Foreign direct investment fell from \$40 billion in early 2013 to \$3 billion in the second quarter of 2015 but is now back up to \$20 billion in 2017 (Trading Economics 2017). In October 2016, the Russian Ministry of Economic Development admitted that living standards are unlikely to improve until 2035 (*The Moscow Times* 2016).

The following charts describe the current economic conditions in Russia today:

GDP: GDP fell in 2014 and then dramatically in 2015 and has experienced a slight recovery in 2017 although never returning to pre-2014 values (Fig. 3.1).

GDP per capita: GDP per capita has taken a similar pattern as the GDP trend, falling in 2014, then dramatically in 2015, and experienced a slight recovery in 2017 (Fig. 3.2).

Unemployment: unemployment levels are higher than in 2014 by half a percentage point (Fig. 3.3).

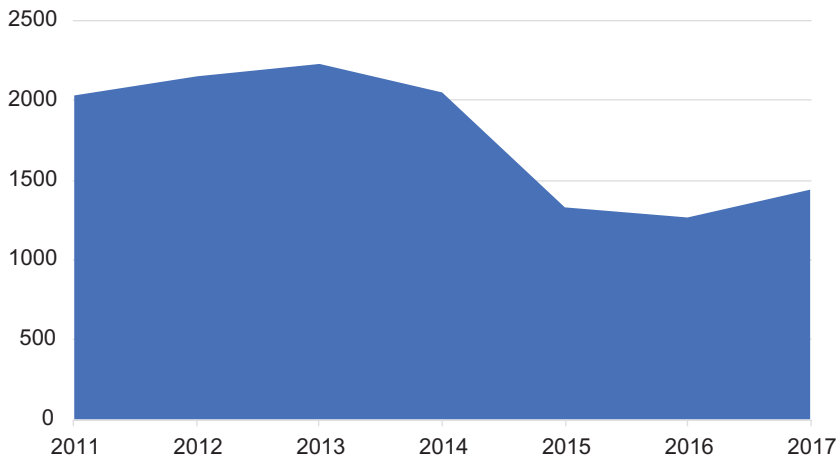


Fig. 3.1 Russian GDP in Billions of Dollars

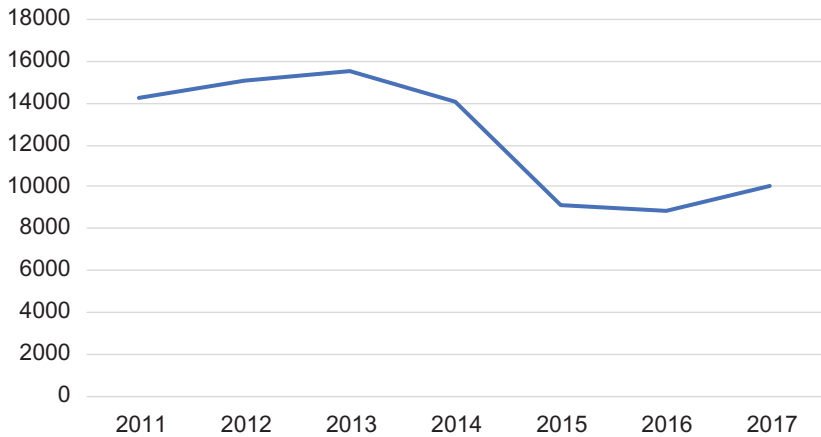


Fig. 3.2 Russian GDP per capita in Dollars

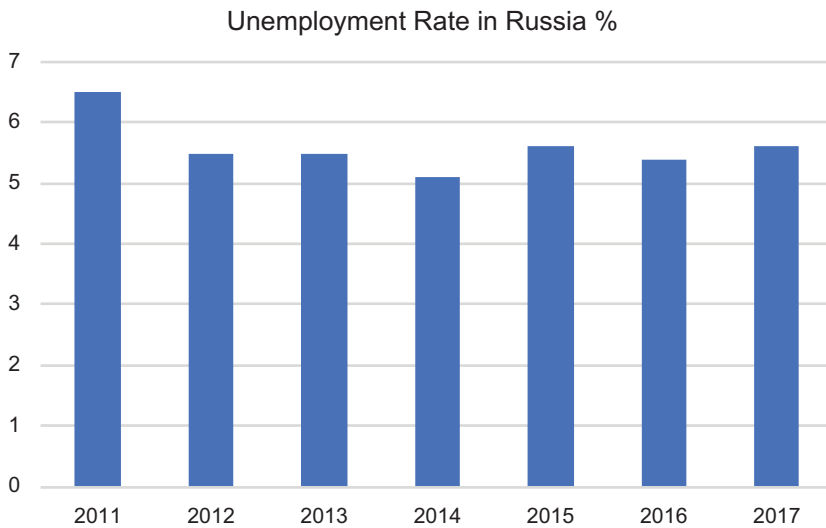


Fig. 3.3 Unemployment rate in Russia



Fig. 3.4 Russian real wage growth trading economics (Russia real Wage Growth 1998–2018. *Source* www.tradingeconomics.com | Federal State Statistics Service)



Fig. 3.5 USD/RUB exchange rate (Trading view, *USD/RUB D FOREXCOM* [Trading View 2017])

Wages: Wages fell between 2012 and 2016, with its most dramatic fall in 2015 but are now seeing a slight recovery (Fig. 3.4).

Value of the Ruble: The value of the Ruble against the dollar fell dramatically in 2015 and 2016 and is slightly recovering today (Figs. 3.5 and 3.6).

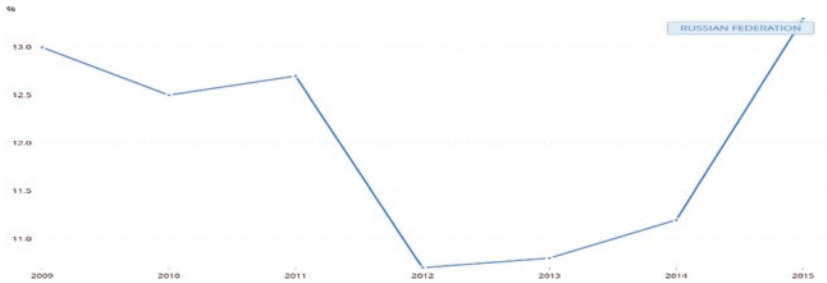


Fig. 3.6 Poverty rate in Russia (The World Bank, *Poverty Headcount Ratio at National Poverty Lines (% of Population)* [2017])



Fig. 3.7 Government spending in Russia (Trading economics, *Russia Government Spending 2003–2018*. Source www.tradingeconomics.com | Federal State Statistics Service)

Government Spending: government spending has decreased after 2014 and slightly increased in the last year (Fig. 3.7).

A regional debt crisis is further fueling discontent. When Putin won in 2012, he promised to implement the “May decrees” to pay higher wages to employees. But the federal budget provided little funding to the regional authorities who then resorted to high-interest loans from commercial banks to be able to pay higher wages to state employees leading the deficit in these regions to spiral out of control. The Kremlin’s stance is to demand more budget balancing from these regions and continue implementing the decrees, which have not done much but bankrupt them. However, the Ministry of Finance plans are to slash the low-interest credit available to these indebted regions, further complicating the crisis (Jarmas 2017).

Based on these trends, it would make sense for presidential ratings to decrease, as approval ratings have been shown to be strongly based on economic performance (Treisman 2011). Daniel Treisman argues that historically, approval ratings in Russia were strongly based on economic performance. Using time-series data, Treisman examined the determinants of presidential approval in Russia from 1991–2008, a period in which leaders' ratings swung between extremes. He finds that Yeltsin's and Putin's ratings were, in fact, closely linked to public perceptions of economic performance, which, in turn, reflected objective economic indicators. Although media manipulation, wars, terrorist attacks, and other events also mattered, Putin's unprecedented popularity and the decline in Yeltsin's are well explained by the contrasting economic circumstances over which each presided (Treisman 2011). However, if Treisman re-conducted his study today, he would find that this has changed in Russia. In the last few years of Putin's term, the economy has not been doing as well as it was during his first 2 terms, yet the population still expresses high approval ratings for him. Although media manipulation, wars, terrorist attacks and other events have mattered, they do not explain the sustainability of his approval ratings since the economic crisis, as it has been four years and his approval ratings are still high.

Domestically, Putin has implemented a nationalist project that is also apparent in terms of the development model the government has adopted for the future. In fact, the fall in the price of oil has led Russia to become more responsible in terms of diversifying its economy and finding other solutions for long-term sustainable growth. This economic project is portrayed as promising, which may help to explain the population's optimism that things will turn around economically in the near future. According to the independent Global Trade Alert, Russia put more protectionist policies in place than any other country in 2013. When Putin refers to Russia as needing its own development model for its current economic needs, this model has much to do with protectionist policies and import substitution. According to Medvedev's report on Russia's economy, Russia is fundamentally restructuring its economic system in response to today's challenges (Medvedev 2016). These challenges began in 2008 and resonated until the present day for all the countries in the global economy. Since the global economic crisis, the global economy has changed fundamentally and has become more politicized at the international level which can affect market competition. The current sanctions on Russia are a graphic illustration of this trend.

Russia's economic development, however, has been strongly influenced by external shocks since 2014 such as the falling price of oil and other commodities and sanctions. Medvedev admits and clearly states that the major reasons for low economic development in Russia are rooted in the structural problems of the Russian economy which became much more apparent after the global crisis and the exhaustion of the economic growth model of the 2000s. Although analysts deemed the Russian economy to be doomed, it is now recovering little by little thanks to the responsible actions of the central bank and government as well as to the slightly higher oil prices. The government developed a system of anti-crisis measures to keep the situation at bay and to ensure macroeconomic stability. Timely decisions to switch to inflation targeting allowed Russia to preserve its foreign exchange reserves and ensure the stability of its monetary system. Despite the fluctuations in the ruble and unlike in other crises, depositors did not flee the banks and rubles were not converted into foreign currency. The national currency prevailed in deposits of the population. In 2015, these deposits went up by a quarter, and Russia's corporate accounts grew by 20% (Medvedev 2016).

The banking system in Russia is also going through fundamental changes and poor performers are being shut down. 28 banks were closed in the first half of 2016 and 93 were closed in 2015. But the banking system in Russia has remained fairly stable despite the troubles. Capital outflow has been considerably reduced. In 2015, it amounted to 58.1 billion rubles compared to 153 billion in 2014, falling by more than 2.5 times as much. Russia's external debt has greatly shrunk as well and has decreased from 733 billion in 2014 to 516 billion, a 30% difference (Medvedev 2016). The crisis has allowed Russia to reorganize its economy and increase its efficiency, which can only bring positive changes for Russia's future. For as long as it existed, Russia has always suffered from "Dutch Disease," or the negative impact on an economy of anything that gives rise to a sharp inflow of foreign currency, such as the discovery of large oil reserves in this case. The currency inflows then tend to lead to currency appreciation, making the country's other products less price competitive on the export market. The "Dutch Disease" has become less pronounced as a result of this crisis. Some industries have increased production and become more competitive such as metallurgy, the chemical industry, production of mass consumer goods, agriculture, and the pharmaceutical industry. In 2015, the food industry grew by two percent, chemical production by 6.3% and oil production by 0.3%.

The production of medicines has increased by 26%. Agriculture is demonstrating steady growth: by 3.7% in 2014, three percent in 2015 and 3.2% in the first seven months of 2016 (Medvedev 2016).

Russia is adopting an import substitution model, but with marked differences from the traditional models of the twentieth century. It is designed to encourage the emergence of competitive producers on the global market, not to oust imported goods. It is also not based on currency manipulation but on creating conditions that are conducive to the emergence of growth of Russian companies that can conquer the global market. The positive effects of import substitution can be particularly noticed in the car-making industry. The average annual share of imports fell by 22.5 percentage points in 2015 thanks to the formation of joint ventures with foreign companies. Moreover, a number of companies have fared better and increased their profits by 53.7% in 2015. The willingness of the population to invest in housing also proved to be an important indicator toward economic development. Anti-crisis measures include additional mortgage lending to 665 billion rubles, or a 44% increase. In 2016 people in Russia became poorer though, and disposable incomes and real wages decreased. Although the aggregate spending of the consolidated budget in real terms for social spending decreased by 5.1% in 2015, budget spending on social policy increased by 0.4% and spending on pensions went up by 1.3%.

Medvedev states that the most important thing that Russia needs to achieve to sustain economic growth is investment—public and private, domestic and foreign. The problem that stirs people away from investing is uncertainty. However, the worst solutions are populism and implementing reforms at the expense of the people. Russia cannot print more money and deregulate the economy, as this would lead to disastrous consequences that the people always end up paying for; it would fuel inflation, devalue people's incomes, salaries, and pensions. Proposals to introduce strict regulation of the economy and return to the Soviet planning system are also unadvisable and not fitting in today's modern post-industrial society, as its collapse clearly demonstrated. Russia is thus pursuing a new development model that fits their development needs, just as they have developed a political model that suits their specific needs. No single economic or political model is the ideal prototype and blueprint for all countries to follow, one of Putin's main messages today.

This responsible attitude toward the restructuring of the economy could be a possible explanation for the “weathering the storm” attitude

noticed in Russia. Throughout his time as President, Putin has always delivered economically and therefore has a reputation for good economic management. Russians mostly blame external sanctions and the price of oil on their current economic climate and blame government policies to a much lesser extent (Simmons et al. 2015). Along with Putin's generally positive economic performance ratings, he has also been known to improve security in Russia, as will be demonstrated in the next section.

CONSTANT IMPROVEMENTS IN SECURITY INDICATORS

As illustrated in the previous chapter, crime significantly decreased during Putin's first two terms. Russia is safer today than it was ten years ago. This is due to several of Putin's initiatives including the centralization of the police apparatus, military reforms and the institutionalization of corruption. Homicide has continued to decline, with the exception of a small spike in 2014 as the graph below demonstrates (UNODC 2017) (Fig. 3.8).

And general crime rates have continued to decline including assault rates, kidnappings, theft, robbery, burglary, and domestic burglary as the chart below demonstrates (UNODC 2017) (Fig. 3.9).

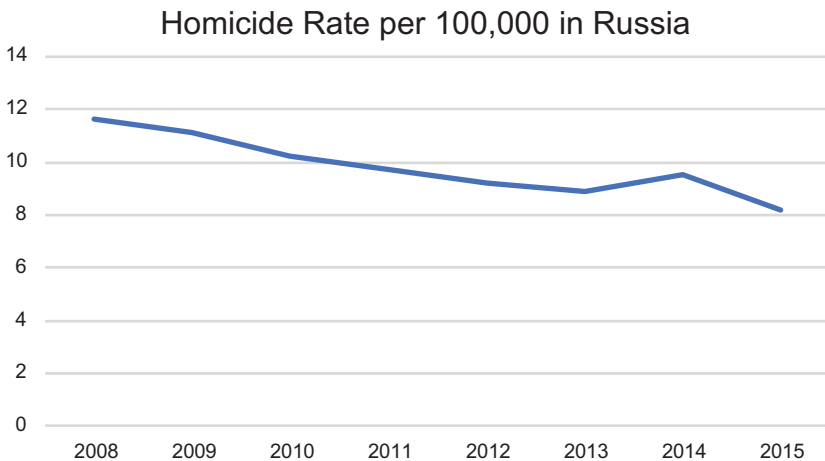


Fig. 3.8 Homicide rate in Russia

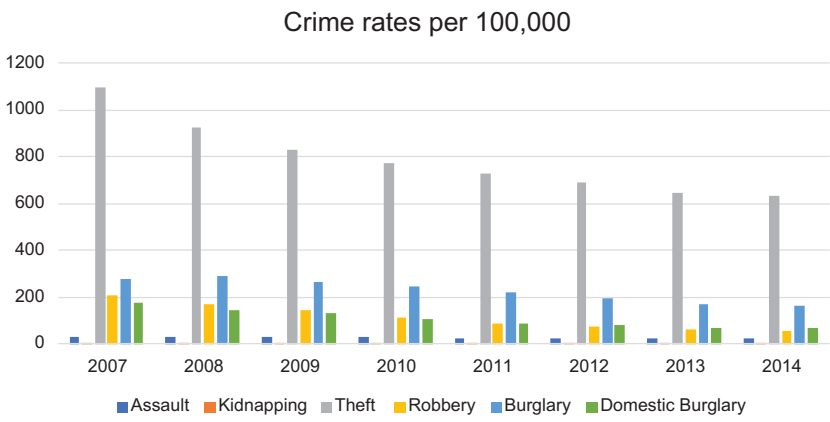


Fig. 3.9 Crime rates in Russia

Additionally, the frequency of terrorist attacks has decreased in Putin’s last term due to his “tough” stance on terrorism (Fig. 3.10).

According to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, incidents of terrorism were especially high during Medvedev’s time as president and tended to occur less frequently during Putin’s time in office (World Terrorism Database 2017). Putin is known to be “tough on terrorism,” which contributes to his appeal among the population. Incidents of terrorism in Russia tend to be linked to the further consolidation of Putin’s power. The apartment bombings in 1999 gave Putin the chance to demonstrate his tough character as he announced that those responsible would be “rubbed out, even if they’re in the outhouse,” and launched a renewed war against Chechnya. The resulting wave of approval from the population was derived by a fear of terrorism and carried Putin to the presidency months later. Today, 18 years later, Putin has remained tough on terrorism and has wiped out thousands of extremists with his army in Chechnya and all over the North Caucasus, his Federal Security Service assassins in Turkey and Yemen, and most recently with his actions in Syria. In 2017, a terrorist attack took place on April 2 in the metro rail in St. Petersburg and the Kremlin’s response was all too familiar. It used the bombings as an excuse for a new round of crackdowns on dissent. In 2004, Putin scrapped direct elections of governors after Chechen militants massacred schoolchildren in Beslan; in 2010, after suicide attacks on the Moscow

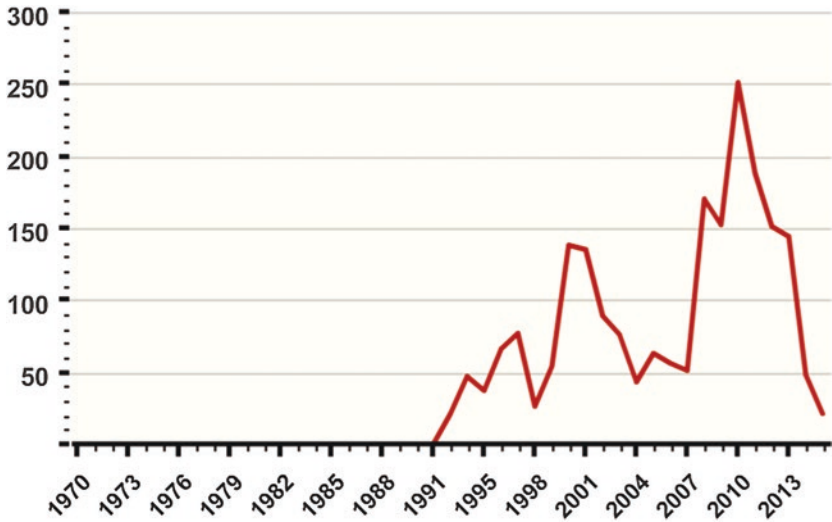


Fig. 3.10 Frequency of terrorist attacks in Russia (Global Terrorism Database, *Global Terrorism Database* [2017])

metro, Putin enacted legislation to control the internet; in 2013, when Moscow's Domodedovo airport was bombed, he expanded the definition of *extremism* to include dissidents of every stripe, from environmentalists to historians. A day after the latest attack, Yury Shvytkin, deputy chair of the Duma's Defense Committee, suggested further controls on public protests. He argued that such a move was necessary for public safety due to the fact that terrorists time their attacks to significant events and significant dates. Putin has proved his ability to withstand terrorism. After these bombings, he used his propaganda machine to stir more public support for his Syria campaign in the guise of protecting Russians. Putin has maneuvered himself into a position where any threat to Russia—whether it is sanctions following his annexation of Crimea or the St. Petersburg bombings—becomes another argument for why Russia needs a strong leader. In addition, it turns any critic of his into a traitor, criticizing the president when their country is under threat. After these attacks, State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin called on lawmakers to defend Russians against Navalny and his vocal anti-corruption campaigns, referring to him as “the voice of the Western security services” (Matthews 2017). These strategies can be defined as “securitization” of

the domestic space due to international threat. This strategy has proved to be a very useful tool when trying to garner political support. By presenting terrorism and the West as constant threats, Putin legitimizes stricter controls internally and portrays it as a necessary strategy toward the protection of the country. This strategy has awarded him high levels of popular support, as will be demonstrated in the sections on discourse analysis and approval ratings.

CENTRALIZATION OF THE POLICE AND MILITARY REFORMS

As part of the newly centralized state, Putin and Medvedev implemented police and military reforms. The police reforms began under Medvedev, where on February 7, 2011, amendments were made to the police force laws, the criminal code, and the criminal procedure code. These changes included a cut in personnel of about 20%, renaming them from militia to police, increasing their wages substantially and centralizing finances. Around 217 billion rubles (\$7 billion) have been allocated from the federal budget to finance the reforms (Center for Security Studies 2010). In 2016, the Federal Service of National Guard Troops was created. This is a merger of several organs such as law enforcement bodies, the interior ministry troops and special units who must all report directly to the president. Its responsibilities include policing as well as terrorism control. They possess extensive equipment such as arms and helicopters and a center for strategic research. This organization is also responsible for the supervision of the circulation of arms among individuals and private guards (Obrazkova 2016).

The Kremlin is now planning a major reform of the FSB to induce further centralization. This organization will now be called the Ministry of State Security, or MGB. There are genuine fears in the media and among experts that this means a return of the all-powerful KGB into the lives of ordinary citizens. After the fall of the USSR, the various departments of the KGB turned into separate forces such as the Federal Protective Service, the Foreign Intelligence Service and the FSB. Under this new MGB, all these departments will be centralized once again and the MGB will have priority over the Investigative Committee and the Russian police force will take responsibility for politically significant cases. The only department that will remain unconnected will be the Presidential Security Service. The abbreviation MGB is exactly what the institution that followed the NKVD was

called, which later turned into the KGB. The NKVD was the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs which was infamous for all the political purging that took place during the time of Stalin. According to some experts, the MGB may be a pragmatic idea because there is a real need to decrease the rivalry between the security services. Also, it is necessary in order to reduce costs to maintain these security agencies, and lastly it would optimize the management of the national security system. All these agencies would be under the control of the president, further strengthening the power of the state. Putin continues to use the same tactics of increasing state strength to appeal to the masses, demonstrating the popularity that these methods have had in the past (Grobman 2016).

In addition to the centralization of the police apparatus, Russia has placed great importance on the reformation of its military. The war in Georgia made it clear that there were serious deficiencies in the Russian military organization, and thus spurred Russia to launch reforms. In 2011, Putin made major decisions to modernize the military through 2020, a program worth 20 trillion rubles or 700 billion dollars (Nichol 2011). Putin believes that Russia needs a strong military as a first priority and also believes that the defense industry could be a potential driver toward its reindustrialization (Trenin 2014). Russia now spends a higher percentage of its GDP on defense than the USA, and has allocated a record \$81bn in 2015 (Nichol 2011). The reforms launched by Russian leadership called for reducing the total size of the armed forces from its size of 1.2 million in 2008 to under 1 million today (Nichol 2011). Three major initiatives included accelerating planned cuts in the officer corps to reduce their numbers from 355,000 to a later adjusted total of 220,000 (Nichol 2011). The reforms also included revamping the training of noncommissioned officers and introducing military police. The reforms aimed to reduce the four-tier command system of military districts, armies, divisions, and regiments to a two-tier system of strategic commands and fully manned brigades that could be quickly deployed for combat. A large-scale 10-year weapons modernization plan was also launched, and military budgets are being increased substantially. The weapons modernization plan prioritizes the procurement of new missiles and platforms to maintain strategic nuclear deterrence, but also includes new planes, helicopters, ships, missiles, and submarines for the Ground Forces, Air Force, Navy, and other arms of service. Russia's national security strategy, military doctrine, and some aspects of the military

reforms reflect assessments by some Russian policymakers that the USA and NATO remain concerns, if not threats, to Russia's security.

This section has demonstrated the continued security improvements in Russia as well as the new plans for further centralization of the police and modernization of the military. Russia's security both internally and externally is vital for presidential approval ratings, and as Putin appears to be continuously improving this aspect of society, people remain pleased.

FOREIGN POLICY

Putin's return to power in 2012 signaled a critical change in both foreign and domestic policy from that of Medvedev's presidency. In terms of domestic policy, Putin reinforced Russian sovereignty, economic nationalism, tighter controls, and increased protection from Western influence. Putin's foreign policy after 2012 is starkly different from his first two terms not because his interests have changed, but more because of the domestic urgency to take a tougher stance on those interests. By the end of his second term, Putin was still not satisfied with the status Russia had achieved in the international realm, and this situation was rendered more complicated as energy prices, which have played a crucial role in supporting Russia's great power aspirations, began to drop consistently. This resulted in a sharp worsening of economic conditions at home. The annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in Syria represented an important contrast with Putin's previous foreign policy as he had mostly avoided military involvement in foreign conflict with the exception of the 2008 war against Georgia. But even though these actions represented a sharp contrast, the main objective is the same, to re-establish Russia as a great power. Instead of prioritizing a rapprochement to the West as a way to improve and modernize the economy, as was the case under Medvedev, the priority became Russian civilization and its cultural and political sovereignty. Confronted with new challenges to his rule, including declining approval ratings, economic downturn and Western influence in Eastern Europe, Putin reached out to nationalist constituencies at home, sought to strengthen Russia's position in the former Soviet region and defied Western international norms as a display of Russia's "Great Power Status," which resonated exceedingly well at home.

Putin's objective as of his third term was achieving full sovereignty for Russia in every sense of the word. This consisted firstly in the aim to try and exclude outside influence on Russian domestic politics as much

as possible, as well as the consolidation of the Russian people around a reinvigorated national idea. It also entailed the ability of Russia to act as it saw fit in the international world as well as regionally in the “Russian world” in accordance with its values and national interests (Trenin 2014). This shift has demonstrated a break from post-Cold War international structures as Russia has adopted the role of being a challenger to the predominantly unipolar world order since the fall of the USSR. Putin’s viewpoints on the state of global affairs have proven to be quite influential among conservative and populist parties of our day, especially as nationalism has once again become a trend in international affairs.

To present relevant background information on Russia’s sovereignty priority, it is important to mention the following. At the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin vocally and publicly criticized US global domination and the post-Cold War world order (Putin 2007). He warned that the US and other NATO members’ bid to push for membership action plans in Ukraine and Georgia could lead to potential conflict and reiterated this point at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008 by warning of the dangers of division and domestic strife in Ukraine if it were offered a path to join the alliance. Putin’s words were perceived by the West as demonstrating neo-imperialist tendencies (Trenin 2014). Although the EU did thereafter temporarily block Ukraine’s plea for NATO membership, both Ukraine and Georgia were promised membership at an ulterior time. Four months later, the war in Georgia broke out, as Tbilisi tried to solve ethnic conflicts to make Georgia eligible for NATO membership (Trenin 2014).

Putin went on record suggesting that Saakashvili had been encouraged by anti-Russian elements in the Bush Administration, such as then Vice President Dick Cheney (Chance 2008). The USA had led a militarization process in Georgia which may have contributed to the overconfident decision Saakashvili took to launch an attack on South Ossetia. The Bush Administration at the time according to The New York Times, was “loudly proclaiming its support for Georgia’s territorial integrity in the battle with Russia over Georgia’s separatist enclaves” (Cooper and Shanker 2008). The USA may have given false hope to Saakashvili by making him assume that the West would come to his aid if he needed it (Froomkin 2008). The USA push for Georgia to join NATO was also a factor that encouraged Sakashvili to take the actions that he did (Zunes 2008).

By the time the war in Georgia broke out, Putin had handed over the presidency to Medvedev. Dmitry Medvedev, Putin’s protégé, was

president of Russia from 2008 to 2012. The Medvedev years symbolized an attempt to reach a rapprochement with the West, with Putin's consent, in hopes of furthering both Russian and Western agendas. However, by the end of Medvedev's term, Putin was not pleased with the results. Medvedev had been encouraged to negotiate several matters with the West when he was in office including strategic arms reduction, joint ballistic missile defense arrangements with NATO, abstaining from a UNSC vote for the creation of a no-fly zone in Benghazi entailing Western use of force against Libya, and the pursuit of modernizing alliances with the leading Western economies with accession to the WTO and to the OECD. In the end, however, although some accords had been signed such as the START treaty of 2010 and Russian accession into the WTO in 2012, key security issues were never resolved. These issues included ballistic missile defense and the misuse of the UN Security Council resolution establishing the no-fly zone over Libya in 2011 to remove Muammar Qaddafi from power, which ignored Moscow's stance on the illegality of regime change. Additionally, Moscow's June 2008 proposal for NATO not to admit new members from former Soviet republics was acknowledged but dismissed, leading Putin to conclude, once again, that the West did not respect Russian interests or views. The Georgian war in 2008 was a very symbolic event in where the West sided with Tbilisi against Moscow. On top of these issues, the Russian proposal to create a joint defense perimeter with NATO as *de facto* military allies was not at all successful, which further led Putin to believe that the West continued to view Russia as an adversary. To Russia, this series of events demonstrated that Russia was free to cooperate with the USA and its allies but only on their terms and on the agenda developed in Washington.

Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 was greeted with disappointment and criticism from Russia's liberals and the Western public (BBC 2011). Medvedev was always better liked in the West due to his more cooperative nature. Putin concluded that the negative sentiments that accompanied his return proved that the West just wants to control Russia and have it abide by its liberal agenda. Putin also received negative reactions by a large portion of the population of Russia as the protests of 2011 and 2012 demonstrated. This was a critical moment for Putin, a moment that he responded to with a completely revised agenda for Russia both domestically and internationally. Though the West saw the protests as the beginning of a Russian spring, Russia saw these

movements as being part of a US-led effort to subvert previously stable regimes around the world as had occurred in the Middle East and Color Revolutions. Ultimately, these regimes were replaced with feeble but loyal democracies or with controlled chaos, in order to expand US global influence. For Putin, the West was always trying to hold Russia down out of fear of competition after the Cold War and refused to respect Moscow and its interests.

As of his last term, Putin has taken an approach toward the USA that entails reciprocal actions and reactions. For Putin, full sovereignty means both independence of Russian domestic politics from outside influence and Moscow's diplomatic equality with Washington in the international realm. In response to the Magnitsky Act of 2012, which imposed sanctions on Russian officials suspected of human rights violations, the Russian parliament banned the adoption of Russian children by US citizens, a practice that had been well established since the 1990s (Shuster 2012).

When Putin returned to the presidency, his *sovereignization* project involved gaining more independence from the West by pivoting Eastward and taking advantage of a rising China to ensure its economic development. Another main goal was to re-establish Russia's image as a "Great Power," (Mankoff 2009) an identity constructed on the image that Russia is a strong and powerful country, as has been the case throughout much of Russia's history. As was stated by the Russian Federation throughout Putin's reign, Russia's foreign policy goals are to "achieve firm and prestigious positions in the world community, most fully consistent with interests of the Russian Federation as a great power" (Federation of American Scientists 2000) and to "secure its high standing in the international community as one of the influential and competitive poles in the modern world" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). Russia has had a preoccupation with status ever since the breakup of the USSR. The word used in Russia to describe this phenomenon is *derzhavnost*, "referring to a preoccupation with great power status regardless of whether Russia has the military and economic wherewithal" (Larson and Shevchenko 2010). Russia's quest for great power status is thus based on "an emotion, it is a craving for a status that most Russians strongly believe is theirs by right, by virtue of the enormous size of the country, its resources, its history" (Smith 2012). Vladimir Putin, especially in recent years, has successfully brought this notion closer to reality for Russian people, which certainly helps to explain his high approval ratings.

Syria

The Syrian intervention was also an unexpected event. Moscow also boldly took the opposite stance of Washington in Syria's civil war, which allowed Russia to be portrayed as a Great Power. Putin refused to help the USA oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad out of power as he represented the better alternative against the "jihadis" opposing him. The Obama Administration conversely supported the opposition. Then, in August 2013, Assad openly challenged the "redlines" imposed by the USA through a chemical weapons attack near Damascus. Obama found himself on the verge of ordering military strikes, but at that moment Putin masterfully used this situation to act as the mediator between the two and ordered a deal to remove Assad's chemical weapons. This was a very surprising feat as Russia is a country with significantly few resources than the USA and very little influence in Syria or the Middle East. Yet Moscow was able to prevent the USA from attacking another country and made a notoriously closed regime give up its sole deterrent in the form of weapons of mass destruction (Trenin 2014).

Russian motives in Syria stem from its desire to pull Russia out of global isolation, distract the international community from the situation in eastern Ukraine and Crimea, reinforce Assad's regime, and to show that Russia's strategy in the Middle East is superior to that of the USA (Trenin 2014). In addition, Putin's objectives were to reaffirm its international great power status, to protect itself from terrorism and to avoid the consolidation of the principle of "responsibility to protect" as international law. Russia is trying to portray itself as a great leader. Also, Syria has been an old ally of Russia's. Russia recognizes that if the Baath state in Damascus is overthrown, the result will be long-term anarchy or at worse a takeover from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and al-Qaeda. Had the Western-backed rebels managed to overthrow the Assad regime, Russia would have seen it as a diplomatic victory of the West and Russia would have looked weak and incapable of protecting its allies (Stratfor Geopolitical Diary 2016). Russia's actions have forced the West to recognize that no solution can be reached without taking its opinion into account. These actions have demonstrated that the world is no longer a unipolar order with the USA as the only dominant player and Moscow plays as big of a role as Washington. Moscow shifted the conflict's course in favor of Syria and demonstrated its military might but also avoided involving itself in a long-term foreign conflict like the USA

did in Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The constant struggle that Russia has to be recognized as a great power is both a historical necessity and a personal desire for Putin, especially to keep ordinary Russians on his side in spite of economic difficulties and international isolation. In addition, Russia's involvement in Syria aims to protect its own security from terrorism, as part of Putin's contract with the ordinary Russians is to keep the society safe in exchange for some of their personal liberties. The fall of the Assad regime would leave Syria in complete chaos which would allow a power vacuum and terrorist groups to fill it and control the territory. Keeping Syria united would deter terrorists from gaining too much power and attacking Russia for example.

Russia has always been a believer in sovereignty and has held international law into high consideration, condemning unilateral military actions without the approval of the UNSC. Russia insists on refraining from interfering in countries' internal affairs whether they are democratic regimes or not. Humanitarian interventions often end up overthrowing the authoritarian governments of the countries where the interventions are being carried out and the Kremlin fears that ultimately, the goal of the West is to topple the Russian government too. Putin's main motivations today include the protection and longevity of his regime. Putin promised Russians order and prosperity at home and renewed dignity abroad in exchange for their tolerance of his authoritarianism. But now that the former pillar is struggling, the latter pillar must be reinforced (Mendras 2015).

The Kremlin-controlled media is highly adept at covering particular stories in ways that will emphasize the West's conspiracy to weaken and humiliate Russia (Rekhtman 2015). Putin has always criticized US involvement in countries where it does not belong, and uses the aftermath of the wars in Iraq, Libya, and Syria as examples of how Western involvement and regime change only end up destabilizing sovereign nations. Respecting national sovereignty internationally has been a point of critique for Putin toward the West. Russia's motivations in helping Syria stem from this belief as well as to appear as a Great Power on the global scene which would force US and European leaders to treat Russia's view with greater respect, especially over the Ukraine Crisis. US policy of arming the rebels has now been declared a failed strategy by the Pentagon (Al-Jazeera 2015). Russian officials have repeatedly recognized the "destabilizing" impact on the Middle East and the developing world that US strategy has had. At a formal military conference in Moscow,

Russian officials focused on the instability in the Middle East and North Africa and the rise of Islamist terrorism as a mix of ill-judged US-led interference that was destabilizing many developing states and part of a US-led plot to dominate the states involved. This point of view is not unique to Russia and is gaining more popularity as each military involvement of the USA is rather unsuccessful in one form or another. Putin's strong criticism against these actions lends him credibility both domestically and internationally.

The Ukraine Crisis

In order to delve into the Ukraine Crisis, it is important first to mention the Orange Revolution that took place in Ukraine in 2004–2005. The Orange Revolution was a series of protests that occurred in Ukraine after the 2004 elections appeared to have been rigged by the authorities in favor of Viktor Yanukovytsch, a pro-Kremlin candidate who ran against Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-Western candidate. These protests successfully led to a revote and resulted in a clear victory for Yushchenko, who received about 52% of the vote, compared to Yanukovich's 44% (Quinn-Judge and Zarakhovich 2004). The Orange Revolution ended as Yushchenko was inaugurated in 2005. However, due to infighting between Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, the Orange party was incapable of holding onto power. Both leaders accused each other of corruption and blocking each other's policies. Yushchenko accused Tymoshenko of destroying the Orange coalition through her "thirst for power." The rivalry between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko intensified as the president's popularity ratings plummeted. By 2010 he was very unpopular as their relationship completely broke down, paralyzing decision-making in Ukraine in the process at very critical moments. During the financial crisis, Ukraine's steel industry and banks collapsed, and many blamed the president for the devastating outcomes in Ukraine. The country was forced to accept billions of dollars in IMF aid, some of which was withheld due to the country's inability to push through economic reforms. Yushchenko was left with few allies in parliament and disillusioned supporters, which explains his loss to Yanukovytsch in the next elections. In the 2010 presidential election, Yanukovich became Yushchenko's successor in what the Central Election Commission and international observers deemed to be a fair election (Polityuk and Balmforth 2010; BBC 2010). However, in 2013, Yanukovich's failure

to sign the Association Agreement with the EU led to massive protests known as the Euromaidan clashes where thousands of people protested in Kiev against his decision. Close to 10,000 demonstrators participated in these protests and carried Ukrainian and EU flags while chanting “Ukraine is Europe” (BBC 2013). The agreement would have opened borders to goods and eased travel restrictions. Yanukovych argued that he could not afford to sacrifice trade with Russia, which opposed the deal, and described the EU offer as inadequate. Many opposition leaders believed this represented a stolen dream for Ukrainians to have a more modern, open and Western way of life.

Yanukovych was ousted from power as a result and fled to Russia. The formation of a new interim government, the restoration of the previous constitution, and a call to hold impromptu presidential elections within months are what followed (McElroy 2014). In order to further its economic development, Ukraine sought closer ties with the European Union. The Association Agreement with the EU would have provided Ukraine with funds in return for liberalizing reforms, however, Russia proposed a more interesting alternative. Yanukovych had claimed he would sign the agreement but refused at the last minute, choosing closer ties with Russia instead due to the better deal that was offered to them by President Vladimir Putin. While Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov had asked for €20 billion in loans and aid (Yahoo 2013), the EU was only willing to offer €610 million in loans while Russia was willing to offer \$15 billion, as well as cheaper gas prices (Heritage and Golubkova 2013). For this reason, Yanukovych deemed Russia to be the better option. In addition, the EU was demanding reforms in return that Russia was not, which also rendered Russia a more appealing option.

After the occurrence of the protests and the formation of the new interim government, Russia refused to recognize it and called the revolution a *coup d'état* and began a military intervention in Ukraine. The interim government signed the agreement with the EU and agreed to apply the necessary reforms in Ukraine with significant financial aid from the IMF (Sullivan and Isachenkov 2014). What followed was pro-Russian unrest in South-Eastern Ukraine, a standoff with Russia regarding the annexation of Crimea and large-scale confrontation between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass (Williams 2014). The Ukrainian parliament voted 328–0 in favor of impeaching Yanukovych and scheduled new presidential elections for May 25, 2014 (Marson et al. 2014). Over the next few days, Russian

nationalist politicians and activists organized rallies in Crimea and urged Russia to help defend the region from advancing “fascists” from the rest of Ukraine (Lukov 2014). On March 1, Russia’s parliament approved a request from President Vladimir Putin to deploy Russian troops to Ukraine (BBC 2014).

After pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych was ousted from power in Kiev, Putin feared that Kiev’s new government would expel Russia’s Black Sea fleet from the Crimean base of Sevastopole (Treisman 2016). Fearing that Sevastopol would land in the hands of NATO gave Putin a strong incentive to take it back. Putin, out of fear that Ukraine would turn Westward politically and economically, used the armed forces to secure Crimea and Sevastopol and held a referendum which overwhelmingly supported the territory’s accession to the Russian Federation. Also, annexing Crimea was Russia’s response to NATO’s Eastward expansion—by getting involved in Ukraine, Russia creates a context by which it will be impossible for Ukraine to become a member of either NATO or the EU anytime soon. It serves as a warning to the West that it must stay out of its zone of influence. In addition, Russia was also righting what most Russians thought of as a historical wrong, that Crimea should be part of Russia and not Ukraine (Lukyanov 2016). Russia has become a revisionist power due to the failure of the West to recognize its rightful place in the international order after the Cold War. Russia wants to change the fact that so much power is concentrated in the hands of the West and wants to advance its views, strengthen its position in the world and protect its sovereignty.

As a result, Crimea was incorporated into Russia and Putin’s popularity soared. Since then, the power balance in the Black Sea has shifted in Russia’s favor. Putin named this project, *Novorossia*, or New Russia, in his March 2014 Crimea speech to parliament, which involved a plan to unify Eastern and Southern Ukraine in their opposition to Ukraine’s Central and Western regions (Putin 2014). Putin vowed to defend the rights of ethnic Russians and those who identify themselves with Russia, wherever they might live. One of the pretexts for Russia’s military invasion in Ukraine has been to defend its citizens and interests, especially in Crimea. Putin’s actions made him extremely popular in Russia and his ratings shot up to 87% in August 2014 (*Moscow Times* 2014), one of his highest ratings of all time (Taylor 2014). A large majority of Russians see Crimea as a part of Russia that was wrongly given to Ukraine 60 years ago, which explains the high levels of support for Putin’s actions in annexing it (*The Moscow Times* 2014). Historically, Crimea was Russian

territory until 1954, when it was controversially “handed” to Ukraine by then president of the USSR Nikita Krushchev, as it has often been recounted. Ukraine has always been culturally and historically close to Russia. More than 7.5 million ethnic Russians live in Ukraine today and more than 60% of the population of Crimea are Russian-speakers, with the rest made up of Ukrainian speakers and Tatars (Orr 2014). Moreover, Crimea is a strategically important geopolitical space for Russia. The Crimean port of Sevastopol, home of the Black Sea fleet, is vital to Russia’s naval power in the Mediterranean and beyond.

What has been interesting to note is the way the international community has reacted to Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Although the annexation of Crimea was condemned by the West, it is hardly mentioned anymore. This is vital in terms of how Putin is “legitimizing” himself and his actions, adding to the “symbolic” power that this study argues he possesses through his identity management strategy of “social creativity,” as will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. The issue of Crimea was even deliberately left out of the protracted Minsk negotiations discussing the war in the Donbas. Public perception and media have shifted into allowing more claims to Russia’s historical claims to the peninsula. Increasingly, the events of 2014 are being framed as something that happened in response to the demands of the local population (Sasse 2017). Thus, the Russian discourse legitimizing the annexation is reverberating widely. However, there was no mobilization from the Crimean people in 2014 nor demands for reunification with Russia. The movement was all led by Russia after the Ukrainian Maidan. In 2014, a particular political context allowed for the mobilization of a latent pro-Russia sentiment in Crimea after the occupation had already occurred, not vice versa. Putin has successfully framed this international event in a way that renders it legitimate enough for many to start seeing his side on it. Though the West has placed sanctions on Russia, many have argued for their lack of use. In this sense, Putin is gaining a large amount of symbolic power as he has been able to defy international norms and take Crimea back as he wanted with no plans to return it (Sasse 2017).

Western analyses of Russia’s actions in Ukraine vary between whether Putin’s motives are aggressive or defensive. The aggressive view states that Russia took advantage of the instability in Ukraine to seize territory it has long coveted. The ultimate goal which has motivated Putin since he took office is to recover political, economic and geostrategic assets lost in the collapse of the Soviet state (Aron 2014). The defensive view states that Russia was threatened by the expansion of the European Union and

NATO, and reacted to the threat that Ukraine's revolution would lead to the expansion of hostile European powers into Russian sphere of interest. As Mearsheimer explained it, "The United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis. The taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West" (Mearsheimer 2014). Although these explanations provide good arguments for Putin's actions in Ukraine, there is another vital motivation at hand and that is domestic and identity-based. Russia invaded Ukraine in part, to prevent the transnational spread of revolution from Ukraine to Russia (D'Anieri 2016). Since Ukraine and Russia are so similar, if Ukraine can succeed at being a well-functioning liberal democracy, Russians may start wondering why it cannot do the same. It also served as an important warning sign to stay out of Russia's "sphere of influence" and for the countries within that "sphere" not to attempt joining the West.

Foreign policy should not be solely analyzed through security and geostrategic dimensions but rather must be seen as a product of a broader social environment that imbues a nation with a purpose and direction of development. Russia's leaders have pursued differing civilizational strategies. These have ranged from Yeltsin's pro-Western ideals, to the second foreign minister Yevgeni Primakov's "Eurasian" vision for Russia with its restoration of great power status and dominance in the former Soviet Region, to Putin's first vision of Russia as a European nation with great power capabilities and special relations outside Europe, to his current vision today of Russia being a unique civilization possessing unique values and developmental needs. A successful foreign policy is not disruptive to the existing system of cultural values (D'Anieri 2016). A successful foreign policy is also one that evolves based on the changing atmosphere of world politics. For example, the more globalized and interconnected the world became, the more the world saw the rise of anti-globalist factions. For Russia, the more the West and NATO encroached on its "sphere of influence," the more threatened they felt, the higher the need to protect its identity.

The Discursive Realm and Foreign Policy

The discursive realm in international relations has provided an interesting challenge to rationalist and positivist analyses which have aspired to empirically explain the development of society. Quentin Skinner observes

that “the only possible judge of the truth of our beliefs must be whatever consensus over norms and standards may happen to prevail in our local culture” (Skinner 2002). Thus, the role of ideas, words, and statements become extremely consequential in the development of the truth. The secret of Putin’s popularity partially lies with his attempt to recreate certain narratives in Russian society which resonates well with the majority of the Russian public. The Ukrainian crisis became the representation of Russia’s long struggle with self-rediscovery (Chebankova 2015).

Mass media are highly important for the Russian leadership. Though anti-Western narratives already existed prior to the Ukraine crisis, they significantly intensified afterward (Yablokov 2014). Emotions, policy tools, images, and other means are mobilized by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build feelings and thoughts about the critical vulnerability of a subject (Balzacq 2015) which Putin manages to do very well with his state-owned media campaign. According to the Copenhagen school, securitization theory, threats, and security are determined through the “speech act” (Austin 1962). By negatively portraying the West at home, Russian leadership can diminish Western criticism of Russia, legitimize Russian behavior to the public, and defend Russia’s national identity as a great power (Hutchings and Szostek 2015). The characteristics used to portray the West include hypocrisy, arrogance, and lack of moral integrity. Using examples both from the past and the present, Russian media tries to de-legitimize Western policy. Russian news Channel Rossiya 1 portrayed former US president Woodrow Wilson as wanting to promote democracy and self-determination in the world, while denying rights to African and Native Americans at home. The presenter claimed that the USA had demanded “the right to judge everyone by its own very flexible standards for a hundred years” (Rossiya 1 2014). These claims help undermine Western condemnation of Russian actions in Ukraine by presenting the West as being hypocritical and self-interested. The concept of “double standards” is often used in the media against the West. Putin for instance pointed out the large presence of American troops and military bases throughout the world, “settling the fates of other nations while thousands of kilometers from their own borders,” and argued that it was “very strange” that Americans should denounce Russian foreign troop deployments so much smaller than their own (Putin 2014).

In approaching the crisis in Ukraine, Russian officers framed the issue a “Color Revolution” and what they saw as a new US and European

approach to warfare that focuses on creating destabilizing revolutions in other states as a means of serving their security interests at low cost and with minimal casualties. Russian state officials accused the USA of this strategy in the Middle East and Africa as well as in Eastern Europe. They describe such actions as having failed and been a key source of terrorism. They have also accused the West as rejecting partnership with Russia on this front (Cordesman 2015). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the USA and the European Union of an attempt to stage yet another color revolution in Ukraine and said during the conference that:

Attempts to impose homemade recipes for internal changes on other nations, without taking into account their own traditions and national characteristics, to engage in the “export of democracy,” have a destructive impact on international relations and result in an increase of the number of hot spots on the world map. (Sputnik 2014)

In a series of articles published prior to the 2012 presidential elections in Russia, Putin laid out his new foreign policy program which was now focused on “preserving Russia’s distinct identity in a highly competitive global environment” (Putin 2011, 2012). Putin emphasized the uniqueness and distinctiveness of Russian civilization and how Russia represented the core of a special Russian world composed of people who associate themselves with traditional Russian values such as the Eastern Slavs of Belarus and Ukraine. He also argued that Russia should be the center of a large geo-economic unit or Eurasian Union, consisting of political, cultural, economic and security ties between the states of the former Soviet Republics. Putin argued the importance of defending indigenous values in a highly globalized world and highlights how this new vision promotes that path. He argued that Europe has taken a negative turn from its respectable model prior to the 1960s and now possesses a “post-Christian” identity which values moral relativism, a vague sense of identity and excessive political correctness (Gessen 2014). Putin concluded that European countries have begun “renouncing their roots, including Christian values, which underlie Western civilization” (Voice of Russia 2013). Putin rather aims to emphasize the values of old Europe while stressing Russia’s unique ones rooted in the Orthodox Christian tradition. These values include the union between a man and a woman and the sanctity of family, religion, the centrality of the state and patriotism (Trenin 2014).

In 2012, Putin began to speak frequently of the need to clamp down on society to ensure its unity. Putin looks to history as the source of his country's national identity. He sees the Russian Orthodox Church as one of the main carriers of traditional values in Russia, and the regime has developed closer ties with the church in recent years (Trenin 2014). Putin symbolically separated what he considers to be the “healthy and conservative” majority in Russian society from the alienated and “cosmopolitan” minority, which he accuses of acting in the interests of the West (Rogoza 2014). The strategy of the political regime is to rely on support from the “passive majority” of society (Vedomosti 2014), or, as another source has called it, the “paternalistic majority” of citizens, who depend on the benefits that the state provides (Nezavisimaia Gazeta 2013). In 2013 Putin made some remarks about the suspicious nature of the historical intelligentsia and asserted that they not only opposed the government but had been disloyal to the Russian nation which resulted in the instability in Tsarist Russia and the USSR which ultimately had “ruinous and destructive” consequences for the Russian people in each case (Putin 2013). By tying together opposition and the destruction of the state using historical examples, Putin seeks to discredit those who oppose his regime. The regime regards its opponents as dissidents, and stigmatizes them as much as possible, in order to isolate them from the majority, this tendency increased after the annexation of Crimea (Samarina 2014). Films in the Russian media display images from World War Two speaking of dissidents as being akin to those who collaborated with the Nazis and taking money from Americans (Vedomosti 2014). All those who oppose the regime are accused of being unpatriotic as being a part of a “fifth column” who collaborate with the wishes of the West (Remchukov 2014). In this way, the internal enemies of the state are linked with the external enemies of the state, thus justifying the tightening restrictions domestically (Volkov 2014).

Putin expressed hostility toward the USA and has complained about its actions which seem to be oriented around unipolarity and American hegemony. Putin blames the USA for what he views as growing instability in the world (Lukianov 2014). In 2012 he described the world as being in a “serious systemic crisis” and added that “the world is entering a zone of turbulence,” with “sharply growing instability” (Putin 2012). For him the disappearance of the bipolar system of the Cold War has brought an end to stability in the world as no other power can contain the unipole (Putin 2014). For Putin, the USA seeks to destabilize

regimes throughout the world to block a transition from unipolarity to multipolarity and is even causing instability within Russia to weaken its regime (Putin 2014).

Putin's increasingly anti-Western outlook has been reflected in a new theme in his speeches during the last few years: his denunciation of the alleged disintegration of moral standards in Western countries. In September 2013, he warned about that tendency: "We see how many Euro-Atlantic countries actually have gone on the path of rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization" (Putin 2014). He returned to that theme with a tone of greater alarm in December 2013, when he charged:

Today in many countries the norms of morality and ethics are being revised, and national traditions and the differences among nations and cultures are being erased. From society now is demanded... also the obligatory recognition of the equivalence, strange as it sounds, of good and evil, concepts that are opposite in meaning. (Putin 2013)

Putin views this as a degradation of moral values that poses a direct threat to Russian security and society and relates the current world instability to the West's resistance of a multipolar world order to ensure its hegemonic domination. Putin's views have gained international support from some leaders as he portrays himself as the leader of world conservatism. In December 2013, before Putin's annual address to the Federal Assembly, The Center for Strategic Communications, an institution said to be closely connected with the Kremlin, held a press conference in Moscow to announce its latest report, entitled "Putin: World Conservatism's New Leader" (Whitmore 2013). Some Russian authors have proudly announced that even in Europe, millions of ordinary people admire Russia and its leader because they defend fundamental, traditional values (Vezhin 2014). In July 2014, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban explained that his country is striving to build a state of "illiberal democracy," in contrast with Western liberal democracy, and acknowledged that Russia is one of the models for the system that he wants for Hungary (Zakaria 2014). Putin believes that Russia is naturally suited to play a key role in the defense of stability in the world, in defending both traditional morality and international stability (Putin 2012). In this manner, Putin is creatively changing the platform through which to compare Russia to the West. Instead of frames of comparison

being centered around how “democratic” a country is or to what extent a country respects human rights, Putin has shifted the modes of comparison into framing the West as a power-hungry and hypocritical force that destabilizes the world. He is also criticizing Western moral standards and the erosion of the original and traditional identity of a Christian. This framework has gained much popular support in recent times among a variety of conservative and populist parties and political candidates throughout the world including the current President of the USA, Donald J. Trump. The spreading of such frameworks of analysis on how to view the world and morality will have implications for the future of the world order and the future of what “truth” is.

Russia's new “civilizationist” discourse emphasizes the Slavic-Orthodox identity and how it is the duty of Russians to protect other ethnic Russians. Channel 1 expressed sympathies with pro-Russian demonstrations taking place throughout Russia whose slogans included “Russia doesn't abandon its own,” “Sevastopol – we are with you,” “The fraternal people of Ukraine are connected to us historically, culturally and by their spiritual values. Our grandfathers and great grandfathers fought together on the front and liberated our great Soviet Union” (Channel 1 2014). In addition, a powerful narrative in the Russian media includes allusions to the Great Patriotic War and fighting off fascism. Russian media often portrays that the new regime in Kiev is either packed with or tolerant of or manipulated by Nazi extremists as an effort to discredit and de-legitimize it.

Also important for Russian media discourse are the links the Kremlin has been forging with the far-right in Europe and in the USA as part of its efforts to promote Russia as the world leader of traditional and conservative values and to undermine liberal, Western, establishment institutions. Russia's endorsement of the nuclear family and the Orthodox Church, its antagonism to non-standard sexualities, and its scorn for “politically correct,” liberal tolerance of differences has resonated with Marine Le Pen in France, Tea Party supporter Pat Buchanan in the US and Nigel Farage's UKIP in Britain to name a few. Their opposition to the EU and to the entire “European project” helps explain the support they have expressed for the Russian position on Ukraine which Russian media outlets have capitalized on to legitimize Russia's actions (Hutchings and Szostek 2015). In addition, Russian influence has been reported in countries such as France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Austria and the Czech Republic. Russia specialist at the Royal United Services

Institute, Igor Sutyagin stated that Russia's propaganda machine was very active and employing "hybrid warfare," a blend of conventional military power with guerilla tactics and cyber warfare. "The Russian campaign exists in a grey area, operating covertly - and often legally - to avoid political blowback, but with the clear aim of weakening Western will to fight, maturing doubts over NATO, the EU and economic sanctions," he said. He also stated that "wherever the opportunity presents itself, Russia wants to undermine the West—to present the argument that the West is no better than they are. It wants to see an end of the European Union because it much prefers a policy of divide and rule" (Foster 2016). Moreover, a report by a private US research group declared that they had discovered substantial evidence that Russia was establishing a campaign of covert economic and political measures to manipulate five different countries in Central and Eastern Europe all to discredit the West's liberal democratic model and to undermine transatlantic ties. The report stated that Moscow had co-opted politicians, used tactics to dominate energy markets and other economic sectors, and undermined anti-corruption measures to gain influence in Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Serbia, and Slovakia. Evidence includes a 12.2 billion euro contract to build two nuclear reactors in Hungary and also the cultivation of pro-Russian businessmen gaining political office in these governments and shielding Russian interests (Walcott and Strobel 2016). Russian economic influence is prominent in Bulgaria with a presence of 22% of its GDP between 2005 and 2014 (Walcott and Strobel 2016). The Center for Historical Analysis and Conflict research in England stated that Russia has opened a new political front within Europe by supporting the far-right against the liberal European Union. Governments and heads of states now openly sympathize with Putin which weakens the European response to Russian aggression (Walcott and Strobel 2016). In French politics, Russia has given loans to the far-right party the National Front, who received 9 million euros from the Moscow-based, first Czech Russian Bank in 2014, and in 2016 Le Pen asked Russia for an additional 27-million-euro loan to prepare for the 2017 elections. Germany also held elections this year and Russia was a debated topic between candidates. Chancellor Angela Merkel maintained her tough stance on sanctions and on bringing a ceasefire to Ukraine and maintaining sanctions on Russia, but some of her competitors held different views. The Social Democrats, Die Like and Alternative for Germany all advocated for lifting sanctions and building deeper ties with Russia. In the UK, Nigel Farage criticized EU sanctions

and expressed admiration for Putin. Also, there is evidence that the UK Conservative Party has received substantial donations with direct links to Russia (Polyakova 2016). The Kremlin's aim is to cultivate a network of people and organizations that support Russian economic and geopolitical interests, denounce the EU and European integration, propagate a narrative of Western decline, and vote against EU policies on Russia such as sanctions. Russia has gained momentum as anti-EU and pro-Russian parties are on the rise. The UK has voted to leave the EU; the refugee crisis is dividing the nations in terms of policy response; trust in establishment parties and media is on the decline; and self-proclaimed illiberal leaders in Poland and Hungary are forging an anti-democratic path that looks East rather than West (Polyakova 2016).

The global situation of “cultural ambivalence” and “global uncertainty” has stimulated a resurgence of civilizational thinking in non-Western cultures including Russia. Pro-Western elites argue that integration with the West is the only available option and constitutes a viable civilizational project. Others caution that such integration cannot be realized without considerable sacrifices at the expense of indigenous values that include religion, moral economy, and local traditions (Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2010). Russia is a proponent of the latter frame of thought and at the 2012 address to the Federation Council, Putin spoke of new demographic and moral threats that must be overcome if the nation is to “be preserved and reproduced” (Putin 2013).

Putin's civilizationist turn resonated well domestically and Russia has seen a resurgence of nationalist thinking since 2012. In contrast to those favoring modernization, those who prioritize defending Russia's sovereignty and cultural distinctiveness have grown increasingly influential in political and policy circles. Orthodox priests for example, including Patriarch Kirill, endorsed the idea of Russia's religion-centered civilizational distinctiveness. Politicians such as the Communist party leader Gennadi Zyuganov regularly speaks of Russia's national interests as tied to Eurasian geopolitics and self-sufficiency. This could explain Zyuganov's rise in popularity since 2012 according to the polls demonstrated above. This “civilizationist” turn embodies a rhetorical tool that Putin is using instrumentally to shape Russia's values in the Kremlin's desired direction and helps to strengthen ties with the Russian masses by identifying with the conservative majority that is sympathetic to Russian distinctive values as opposed to the more cosmopolitan and West-leaning middle classes. In order to legitimize this civilizationist turn, Putin has

managed to effectively “securitize” the West as a threat, and because of this, the Russian population is more inclined to rally around its leader against that perceived threat. Putin defiantly blamed Russia’s turmoil on the West at an annual year-end conference, stating that the West has plotted to weaken Russia as a nation. He blamed “external factors, first and foremost” for the economic situation in Russia and even stated the possibility that the fall in the price of oil was a plot between the USA and Saudi Arabia to weaken Russia, Iran, and Venezuela (Birnbbaum 2014). Putin also stated that:

...the United States has overstepped its national border in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this? ... Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy. We are not going to change this tradition today. (Putin 2007)

In February 2013, Russia released a New Foreign Policy Concept that emphasized global economic competition, within which different “values and development models” would be tested and “civilizational identity” would obtain a new importance. In this context, civilization was understood to be a distinct cultural entity, not a universal phenomenon. Russia was beginning to see itself as culturally and politically independent from the West. In his 2013 address to the Federation Council, Putin further positioned Russia as a “conservative” power and the worldwide defender of traditional values (Putin 2013). The Foreign Policy Concept signed by Putin into law in February 2013 describes the world in terms of a “rivalry of values and development models within the framework of the universal principles of democracy and the market economy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013). In other words, these speech acts have revealed the “threat” of the West imposing its values onto Russia and Russia’s new civilizationist approach to “defend” itself and its values. In his Valdai Club speech in 2014 Putin noted:

Primitive borrowing and attempts to civilize Russia from abroad were not accepted by an absolute majority of our people. This is because the desire for independence and sovereignty in spiritual, ideological and foreign policy spheres is an integral part of our national character... the 21st century promises to become the century of major changes, the era of the formation

of major geopolitical zones, as well as financial and economic, cultural, civilizational, military and political areas. (Putin 2014)

Putin's third term marks a shift in his political ideology. In earlier years, Putin was considered a pragmatist by many. After the annexation of Crimea Putin has become a different kind of leader, motivated by ideology, regardless of the cost to Russia's economic well-being (Matthews 2014). A new ideology has taken shape in the Kremlin, and it has taken hold as Russia's national idea (Gessen 2012). Before his third term as president, Putin was "non-ideological" and a pragmatist, but after his return to the presidency, he promoted an ideology of conservatism (Lukianov 2014).

The "third wave of democratization" emphasized the transnational diffusion of democracy (Huntington 1968). The Color Revolutions that took place in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan were analyzed as all stemming from each other and being the result of the diffusion of revolutionary tactics. Russia and other autocratic regimes began actively responding to this phenomenon by putting pressure on NGOs and opposition politics to combat the transnational spread of democracy. Changes in regime type can have enormous geopolitical impacts; the spread of particular regime types, or the resistance to them, becomes a geopolitical tactic. If the West, in viewing democracy as a universal value, underestimates this, Russia clearly does not. Putin sees the spread of promotion of democracy as aimed against Russia's interests. Thus, Putin has pointed to what he sees as the hypocrisy of the US position on Crimea. In the case of Kosovo, Putin argues, the USA stated that the secession of a territory could be legal even against the opposition of the state from which it was seceding (Putin 2014). By alleging a double standard, Putin hopes to demonstrate that US talk of international law and democracy is a geopolitical weapon, not an actual principle (D'Anieri 2016).

As Putin argued in his speech in Sevastopol, the West's actions in Eastern Europe such as support for the Color Revolutions and the promise of NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine were offensive in nature (Putin 2014). The EU over time has tried to engage some of the former Soviet republics in programs such as the Eastern Partnership, developed in 2009, which Russia felt to be an infringement of its sphere of influence. Therefore, when Russia began its Eurasian integration project, a geopolitical confrontation with the EU began (Sakwa 2015).

This is important in regard to the Ukraine crisis as Foreign Minister Lavrov stated: “The EU Eastern Partnership program was also designed to expand the West-controlled geopolitical space to the east...There is a policy to confront the CIS countries with a hard, absolutely contrived and artificial choice – either you are with the EU or with Russia. It was the use of this approach to Ukraine that pushed that country... to a profound internal political crisis” (Lavrov 2014b). For these reasons, Russians are more likely to blame the West for the crisis in Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov sides with the argument of the West’s persistent offensiveness in his speech at the UN general assembly:

The situation there has revealed the remaining deep-rooted systemic flaws of the existing architecture in the Euro-Atlantic area. The West has embarked upon a course towards ‘the vertical structuring of humanity’ tailored to its own hardly inoffensive standards. After they declared victory in the Cold War and the ‘end of history’, the US and the EU opted for expanding the geopolitical area under their control without taking into account the balance of legitimate interests of all the people of Europe. While Russia was seeking cooperative relations, its western partners have promoted their own agenda, ignoring Russia’s interests in many points, expanded NATO, and generally attempted to move the geopolitical space under their control directly to the Russian borders. (Lavrov 2014a)

It is impossible not to note, however, that Russia’s actions in Ukraine imitate the very US actions that Russia is so critical of. Götz argues that Russia exhibited a similar behavior in Ukraine in that it “is engaged in a geopolitical offensive, extending beyond Ukraine, with the aim to promote or consolidate its regional primacy” (Götz 2015). Russia enjoys openly criticizing the US, and in this instance, has adopted similar “imperialistic” behavior. Russia is taking the stance that if the USA can do something then so can they; a very reactive approach to international relations. In this reactive stance, however, which is drawing much international criticism, a debate is being created. Why be so critical of Russia’s “imperialism” and be so tolerant of that of the USA? Though Putin’s actions in Ukraine are looked down upon internationally, they shine a hypocritical light on past US actions and the lack of international reaction they have garnered. This further legitimizes his criticism of US and Western hypocrisy, which falls into the “social creativity” identity management strategy that Putin is deploying to garner positive national self-esteem.

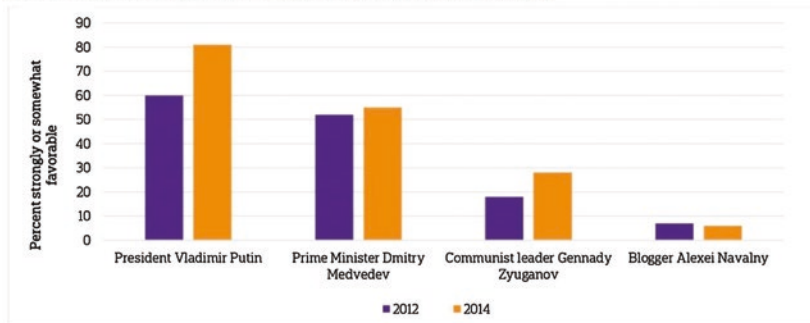
By portraying the West in a negative light, Russia can be seen either in a more positive light or on par.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF POLITICS, THE ECONOMY, SAFETY AND FOREIGN POLICY

This section will demonstrate the perception of the Russian public on matters including domestic politics, the state of the economy, security levels and foreign policy. The overarching conclusion is that the population in Russia approves of the way Putin is handling the country both domestically and internationally and has adopted a “weathering the storm” attitude toward the economic difficulties in the country. Moreover, the media has demonstrated to have a strong effect on that mentality, as the polls reveal that the more one watches state television, the more one is likely to believe the country is great. The following opinion polls have been derived from the Pew Research Center, the Levada Center, NORC Center, and Gallup. The diversity of sources used in the gathering of opinion data renders the data more accurate. No pro-Russian sources have been used in the collection of this data. In a study conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs at the University of Chicago in 2014, polls revealed that Putin is extremely popular and that despite economic tensions and international conflict, most people believe Russia is headed in the right direction. Most reported that their families’ finances are in fair shape and expressed optimism that their financial situation would improve in the next years. Many believe the economic sanctions are hurting the country’s economy, but less than half reported that these sanctions are harming their personal finances. 81% of respondents expressed approval for Putin when the survey was conducted in 2014, after the ruble fell by 40%, and only 6% expressed strong disapproval. This demonstrates a significant increase from the 58% approval ratings Putin had shortly after his inauguration in May of 2012 (NORC 2015).

Media are a significant factor in public opinion and the study revealed that 3 in 4 Russians say state-owned TV stations are their main source of news and 56% of Russians say they read or watch the news at least once a day. The respondents who reported that state-owned news is their main source of news were more likely to approve of Putin, about 84%, than those who used other media outlets such as the internet or

Percent of Russians who rate each individual as favorable in 2012 and 2014



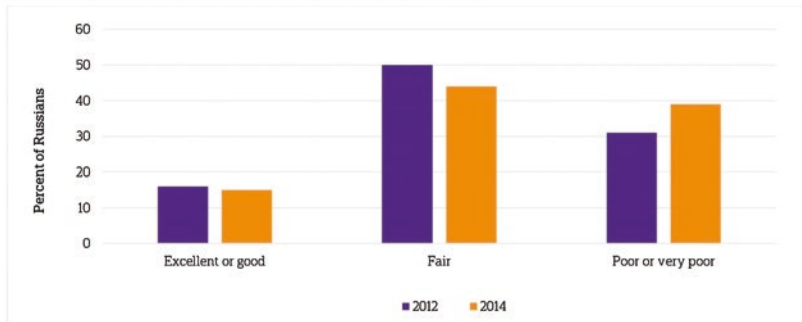
Question: Please tell me if you have favorable, unfavorable, or neither favorable nor unfavorable view of the following people?

Fig. 3.11 Russian ratings of political Figures 2012 vs 2014 (NORC, 2014–2018, *Percent of Russians Who Rate Each Individual as Favourable in 2012 and 2014*)

independent international media, who approved him at a rate of 73%, which is still very high, thus demonstrating that it is not *only* out of sheer media manipulation that Putin keeps his popularity high, but it certainly plays an important role in legitimizing his actions. In addition, 83% of people who reported watching the news daily approve of Putin compared with 76% of those who tune in weekly or less, which is less, but still high (NORC 2015). 82% of those living outside of Moscow approve of him while 71% of those living in the city approve. Putin's favorability outweighs that of many other prominent politicians in Russia. 55% view Medvedev very favorably, 28% view Communist party leader Gennady Zyuganov favorably and only 6% view Alexei Navalny favorably, the latter being mostly Russians with a higher income. The graph below compares the differences in public opinion in 2012 and 2014 on these political figures, demonstrating that 2014 was an important year for Putin's increase in approval ratings (Fig. 3.11).

Vladimir Putin's approval ratings increased in 2014, as did Medvedev's and Zyuganov, compared with 2012 responses. Ironically, opposition leader Navalny's popularity slightly decreased. He has had limited influence on political thought according to these polls (NORC 2015). This demonstrates the weakness of the opposition movement in Russia on a larger scale.

Russians' ratings of the condition of the economy in 2012 and 2014



Question: How would you rate the condition of our country's economy today? Is it excellent, good, fair, poor or very poor?

Fig. 3.12 Ratings of economic conditions 2012 vs 2014 (NORC, 2014–2018, *Russians' Ratings of the Conditions of the Economy in 2012 and 2014*)

The NORC's study also found that economic issues are important to Russians as they cited the economic and financial crisis most often as being the most important problem facing the country (21% of respondents). 4 in 10 reported that their biggest problems were price increases, inflation, low wages, and pensions. Russians expressed mostly negative views of the economy. 15% said it was excellent or good, 44% said it was fair, and 39% said it was poor or very poor. The answers varied based on the education level of the respondents. 43% of respondents with a university degree or higher said the economy was poor compared to 33% with a high school education or less. Based on the graph below, the answers have gotten less optimistic in 2014 from 2012 (NORC 2015). But even despite worsening views and perceptions over the state of the economy, Russians still approve of their leader (Fig. 3.12).

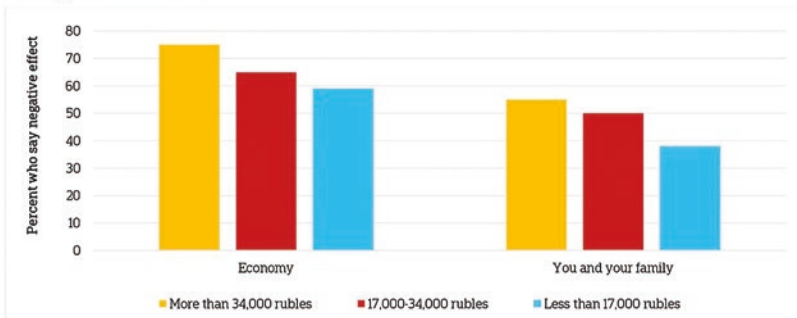
Compared to 2011, 44% say the economy is somewhat or much worse, 28% say about the same, and 23% say much or somewhat better. The responses are therefore quite diversified. Those living inside Moscow were more likely to say the economy is worse than in 2011 (61% vs 42% living outside Moscow). Also, those with higher incomes were more likely to say that the economy has worsened. 56% of those with higher incomes (more than 34,000 rubles a month) report the economy is worse than three years ago compared to 45% of middle-income earners (incomes between 17,000–34,000 rubles a month), and 39%

of lower-income Russians (less than 17,000 rubles a month) (NORC 2015). 1 in 4 Russians said their finances are excellent or good in 2014 (24%), half said fair, and about 1 in 4 said poor. These views did not change much from 2012 to 2014. There is no obvious trend that families perceive their personal finances to have gotten worse. Just 37% say their own finances have worsened while 39% say they have stayed the same and 23% say they have gotten better, again, with Moscow residents being more likely to say their families' finances are poor at 31% vs 23% of non-Moscow residents (NORC 2015). Only 18% think the economy will get worse whereas the rest believe it will either stay the same or become much better (38%), with those in Moscow mostly making up those who say it will get worse (40%). 43% of respondents between 18 and 34 expressed the economy would be much better in a few years compared with 36% of adults between 35 and 54 and 34% of those 55 and older. Russians also expressed optimism in terms of their families' finances for the future where 37% expect their families' finance to be better in three years, 28% say their situation will stay the same, and 13% say it will get worse. Residents of Moscow showed more skepticism and are less likely to say their families' finances will be better in three years 23% vs 38% of non-Moscow residents (NORC 2015).

Most Russians believe Western economic sanctions are affecting the Russian economy negatively, about 64%. 29% report the sanctions have had no effect on the economy and 7% say they have had a positive effect. However, fewer say the sanctions are having a direct effect on their families. 45% say the sanctions have had a negative effect on their family, 54% percent report no effect, and 2% report a positive effect. Those living in Moscow are more likely to respond that the sanctions are having a negative effect on the economy and their families (81% vs 62% and 63% vs 43%). Income was also shown to affect people's perception on the effect of sanctions. Three-fourths of respondents with higher incomes of more than 34,000 rubles a month reported sanctions having a negative effect on the economy compared to 59% of those making less than 17,000 rubles a month. Similarly, 55% of those with higher incomes reported the sanctions have had a negative effect on their families' finances compared with 38% of those with lower incomes (NORC 2015) (Fig. 3.13).

This shows that most Russians are adopting a "weathering the storm" attitude toward the economy rather than sharp criticism of their leader on poor economic performance. In addition, more seem to blame economic sanctions for any negative effects on family finances than the

Russians with higher incomes are more likely to say economic sanctions have had negative effects on both the economy and their families



Questions: What, if any, effect have economic sanctions from Europe and the United States had on the [Russian economy/you and your family]? Would you say extremely negative effect, negative effect, no effect, positive effect or extremely positive effect?

Fig. 3.13 Effects of sanctions and income levels (NORC, 2014–2018, *Russians with Higher Incomes are More Likely to Say Economic Sanctions Have Had Negative Effects on Both the Economy and Their Families*)

general state of the economy. Respondents have generally not expressed that their personal finances are doing much worse. Moscovites and wealthier Russians tend to have a slightly more pessimistic outlook on the situation though. Nevertheless, as the statistics also demonstrated, Vladimir Putin's approval ratings are very high.

In an April 2016 poll conducted by the Levada Center, 56% of respondents said they wished the Soviet Union still existed (Yegorov 2016). Another survey by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion (now known as the Levada Center), showed that 64% of Russians would vote for the preservation of the USSR if a similar referendum to the one held in 1991 was held today (Yegorov 2016). This nostalgia is highest among older Russians who live in rural areas, but there are also many young people who are successful and modern who long for it. 50% of young people surveyed by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion shared this opinion (Yegorov 2016). A possible explanation for this could be that nostalgia and poverty go hand in hand. The head of the research project at the Levada Center, Mikhail Mamonov, stated that those who were positive about the Soviet Union pointed out the same three things; a small but guaranteed salary, employment and things that are guaranteed for you. In an era of harsh market competition, people want to retreat to a time when they think all these things existed.

Levada Center surveys show that nostalgia for the USSR peaked in 2000, when 75% of the population said they regretted its dissolution (Yegorov 2016). Throughout the 2000s, the level of nostalgia decreased, reaching its lowest point in 2012—but even then, 49% of the population still expressed regret about the Soviet Union’s breakup. The level of nostalgia began to rise again starting in 2014. Mikhail Mamonov points to economics as being behind the growth of Soviet nostalgia. In the year 2000, the number of Russians living at or below the poverty line reached its peak. Later, as incomes began to grow, fewer people were longing for the past. With the beginning of the economic crisis, nostalgia came back (Yegorov 2016). Putin has exploited the economic insecurity and the Soviet nostalgia to his advantage and has managed to garner nationalist sentiment and a consolidated Russian identity that reveres its Soviet roots more than ever. He has fundamentally understood the needs of the population based on what they are currently lacking. He appeals to their emotions through the use of Kremlin-controlled media heroically depicting his actions abroad and emphasizing the threat of the West which has further revived feelings of Soviet nationalism.

According to the Levada Center, when asked what kind of democracy Russia needs, almost half the respondents said Russia needed a very special and unique kind of democracy, while 19% stated the country needed the same kind of democracy that existed during the Soviet Union, and 5% stated Russia did not need a democracy at all. Only 16% believed in Western-style democracy (Balmforth 2013). This shows that Russians may not feel a strong need to implement Western-style democracy in their country and rather believe that Russia has its own political and developmental needs and should not have liberal democracy imposed on them.

Jana Bakunina, an emerging broadcaster, wanted to discover what this special form of democracy was and conducted several interviews of Russians living in Moscow and as expats in Europe. When interviewed about what type of democracy Russians wanted, respondents believed Russia needed a special form of democracy but did not have a very specific idea of what that entailed. When they were asked about it, most spoke of Peter the Great, or of Stalin, or of a strong leader for Russia due to the “overemotional” nature of the population or their “lack of discipline.” Examples of Yeltsin’s chaotic times were often given to depict what Russia would look like under a leadership that was not disciplinarian. Many respondents even said Russia did not need democracy at

all and cited the achievements of leaders who ruled with a fist such as Ivan the Terrible, Josef Stalin and Peter the Great. When asked about American style democracy, respondents were especially critical and blamed it for the troubles in the Middle East and for the social unrest in Ukraine after being “swayed” by US and EU promises (Bakunina 2016). For Russians, values such as human rights, freedom of speech and equal opportunities for minorities are too far removed from day to day life to be considered a priority. The elite in Russia work well with controlled media and reinforce the idea of Russia’s “unique path” and that “the western model just wouldn’t work in Russia.” Values such as integrity, orthodoxy and “the national spirit” have once again conquered the Russian minds. New terms, such as a “governed democracy” and “sovereign democracy” are being used to describe the form of rule. In fact, more people in 2015 believe that there is democracy in Russia today than in the last 11 years, despite Putin’s tightening on reigns. Fewer people believe it “has not found its feet yet” as well.

Russians have also demonstrated that they view their government as respecting their rights and freedoms more in recent years. In 2015, 63% of Russians say this is the case, while only 29% disagree. Since 2008, belief that the Russian government respects its people’s rights is up 18 percentage points (Simmons et al. 2015). This directly contradicts the tightening of controls that Putin has implemented in the last few years which points to the idea that Russians may place more value on other types of freedoms and rights other than fair and equal participation in politics or free media. These types of freedoms and rights are found in a “sovereign democracy,” which in its essence attempts to do what is best for the population as a whole as opposed to emphasizing individual rights and freedoms, and views the state as the decisive ruler to decide and implement which policies the nations needs for its specific developmental and political needs.

Vladimir Putin remains very popular and, the most commonly heard reasons why that is the case include the fact that he is a strong leader, has built Russia’s middle class, has improved social welfare in Russia, has restored Russian might, and lastly, that there is no viable alternative to him. In the past, Russia has done well under autocratic and repressive leaders while indecisive leaders such as Yeltsin or Gorbachev never inspired trust or respect. Putin is liked for his directive nature, for the improvement in Russian standards of living, but most recently, for the fact that he has restored national pride. According to the Federal State

Statistics Service of the Russian Federation, Russian GDP per capita increased from 49,800 rubles in 2000, to 461,300 in 2013, and the frequency of Russian citizens traveling abroad has increased from 9.8 million in 2000, to 38.5 million in 2013. In addition, for the first time in the last 20 years, new births in Russia were recorded as higher than deaths in 2013. Pensions went up from 694 rubles a month in 2000, to 9918 rubles in 2012. Crime decreased, including murders from 28.2% in 2000, to 10.1% in 2012 (Federal State Statistics Service Russian Federation 2018). These are a few important improvements to give Putin credit for. Putin restored the values that Russians care about most, which include stability, the integrity of their country, their sphere of influence in international relations, and standing up to US domination. Respondents stated his popularity was mostly about Russia's global standing. With an improved defense industry and the annexation of Crimea, Russians regained their military sea base on the Black Sea, protecting itself from NATO expansion. Russians have regained self-respect and national pride after their chaotic times in the 1990s. The respondents especially emphasized Putin's ability to keep the country stable and juxtaposed Russian stability with the situation in Ukraine being beyond repair. Russia has had a difficult history of war, repression and famine, which has rendered the national spirit more tolerant to austerity and may explain their propensity to stability rather than prosperity and make them less concerned with individual freedoms than with the collective sense of status and integrity. Russians may have inherited the Eastern sense of acceptance and predisposition toward authoritarian regimes (Bakunina 2015).

In terms of perception of public safety, Gallup's research project demonstrated that these have dramatically improved since 2006. In 2006, 27% said they were at ease going out alone after dark compared to nearly 40% in 2013 (Bakunina 2015). This study posits that in conditions of disorder or insecurity, as was the case in the 1990s in Russia, establishing security and order becomes more of a priority to the population than civil liberties, which explains their willingness to elect and then continue to support a "hardline" leader such as Vladimir Putin. In addition to this argument, Russian history has always been under autarky and central control, and therefore re-instating such controls was not considered anything out of the ordinary. Russians have always taken pride in their "strong state," and the 1990s was mostly an era of shame. Security and order is a prerequisite for the "strong state" that Russians

overwhelmingly support. A study found that the greater people's sense of threat, the lower their support for civil liberties. This effect interacts, however, with trust in government (Davis and Silver 2004). But based on opinion polls from the NORC, Russians generally have high levels of trust in their government. Three in four Russians say they trust the presidency to do what is right either just about always or most of the time. Seventy-eight percent of those whose main source of news is state-owned TV say they trust the presidency to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time” compared with 66% who have a different main source of news. Trust in the other four state institutions below are less prevalent, but rates have increased overall since 2012 (Fig. 3.14).

Also, people's perception of the gravity of 14 existing problems in Russia has dropped since 2012. In particular, there have been significant declines in the proportion of Russians who identify crime (79% vs 63%), access to education (65% vs 51%), organized crime (74% vs 61%), and unemployment (76% vs 65%) as serious problems (Fig. 3.15).

In terms of foreign policy, Putin's assertive actions in the near and far abroad have allowed the Russian population to perceive Russia as reaching its goal of attaining great power status. A poll by NORC demonstrates that Russians believe Russia is a stronger international power compared with 10 years ago by an overwhelming majority (NORC 2015) (Fig. 3.16).

Putin's level of respect among Russians continues to rise as he stood up to the pressure of the economic sanctions imposed by the West as

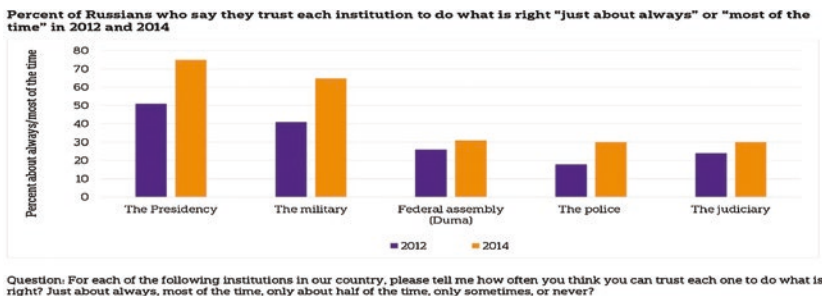


Fig. 3.14 Trust in domestic institutions 2012 vs 2014 (NORC, 2014–2018, *Percent of Russians Who Say They Trust Each Institution to Do What is Right “Just About Always” or “Most of the Time” in 2012 and 2014*)

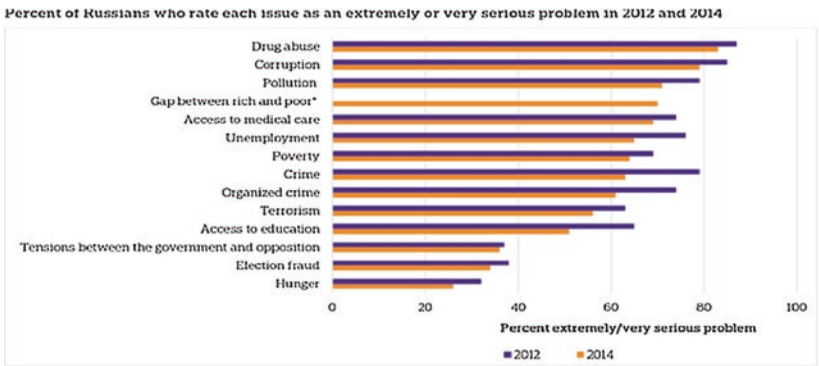


Fig. 3.15 Severity of internal problems 2012 vs 2014 (NORC, 2014–2018, *Percent of Russians Who Rate Each Issue as an Extremely or Very Serious Problem in 2012 and 2014*)

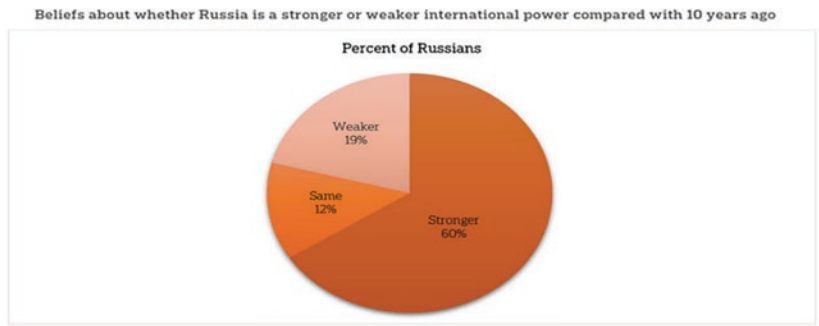


Fig. 3.16 Russia’s strength as an international power (NORC, 2015, *Beliefs About Whether Russia is a Stronger or Weaker International Power Compared with 10 Years Ago*)

a result of the Ukraine crisis. The sanctions have even played a role in helping Putin rally people around opposing the West as evidenced by Russia’s declining public attitudes toward the US. According to the Washington Post, 81% of respondents from a Levada Center survey possessed a negative view of the USA in 2015 (*Washington Post* 2017).

The unfavourability of Barrack Obama dramatically increased in 2014 from 2012 as the graph below shows, pointing to the success of

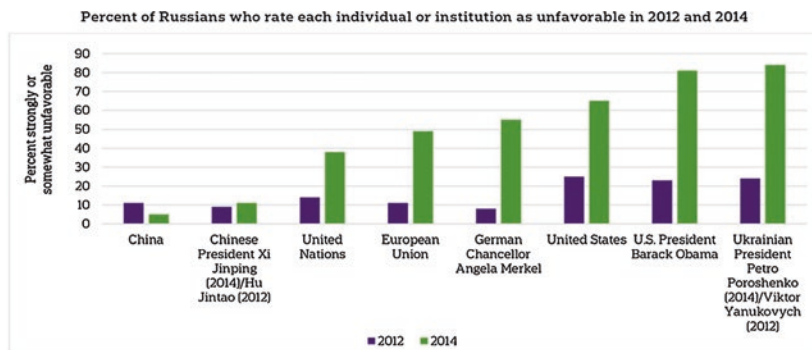


Fig. 3.17 Favorability of foreign individuals and institutions 2012 and 2014 (NORC, 2015, *Percentage of Russians Who Rate Each Individual or Institution as Unfavourable in 2012 and 2014*)

Vladimir Putin's media campaign that frames the conflict in Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions in a way that renders Russia more a victim rather than a villain. The same goes for public sentiment toward the EU which went from being weakly favorable to strongly unfavorable since 2012. In 2014, nearly half of Russians had an unfavorable view of the EU and only 8% had a favorable opinion whereas in 2012 only 11% had a negative opinion of the EU and 24% had a position view (Fig. 3.17).

According to the Pew Research Center, Russians have very negative perceptions of the West, which have increased dramatically after 2014, which coincides with Putin's major crackdown on independent media and Western influence inside the country. In 2015, 85% of respondents had an unfavorable rating of the US, 88% possessed an unfavorable opinion of NATO, 65% for Germany and 69% toward the EU (Simmons et al. 2015), demonstrating rising nationalist sentiment and the success of Putin's media campaign. Moreover, the population appears to have higher confidence levels in Putin and appears to be very satisfied with his handling of both international and domestic affairs (Simmons et al. 2015).

The results of Pew Research Center surveys support the argument that nationalism is getting stronger in Russia. According to their survey, 93% of Russians had a favorable opinion of their own country and this number rose 12 percentage points in 2014 with those stating they had a *very* favorable opinion of their homeland. The Soviet

nostalgia discussed above is also noted in their survey. 69% of Russians said that the fall of the USSR was a negative thing for Russia and only 17% said it was a good thing. Older Russians were much more likely to say that the breakup of the USSR was a bad thing (85%). Additionally, 61% of Russians agreed that there are neighboring countries that really belong to Russia. This number has dramatically increased since 2002. In 1992, following the breakup of the Soviet Union, fewer than four-in-ten Russians believed that other countries belonged to the Russian state, and still fewer believed this in 1991 (22%) (Simmons et al. 2015).

Despite the meager economic performance and heightened political restrictions, the population of Russia has expressed very high levels of approval for their leader and for the way he runs the country domestically as well as his international actions. When Putin took office for the third time, he further centralized and consolidated the Russian regime, which is now considered authoritarian by Freedom House standards (Freedom House 2016). Instead of rebelling further, the population did not express mass indications of discontent, according to the various polls demonstrated here. The return to a centralized and authoritarian state resembles the strong state of the Soviet Union, and framing the West as a threat to the Russian identity has allowed Putin to legitimize his actions and garner the support of the population. Russians, for the most part, agree that Russia is unique and requires its own political and developmental models and strongly support Putin's actions domestically and abroad. For this reason, they are more likely to express optimism about Russia's future economic situation and weather the storm.

Regional Public Opinion of Vladimir Putin

Russians generally approve of Vladimir Putin, but Russia's voting patterns vary per region. There are four different regions of Russia, each possessing different values and qualities of life (Zubarevich 2013). The first category, or "Russia One" includes the largest metropolitan cities possessing a million or more inhabitants where a large portion of the population holds an advanced degree, is employed in the small-business sector and registers high internet usage. Electoral data show that, during the 2012 presidential elections, less than one half of Muscovites voted for Vladimir Putin. Other cities that have million-plus populations include Yekaterinburg and Novosibirsk, where progress is faster than in Omsk, Ufa, and Volgograd due to their location as macrocenters in the

Urals and Siberia which pulls in a lot of migrants and well-paying jobs. In Omsk, Ufa, and Volgograd, Soviet-era industrial specialization has been kept and these cities have progressed more slowly. Russia One possesses a very mixed socioeconomic and demographic population though and its modernization should not be overestimated. Many portions of the population retain statist values and remain antiliberal and therefore approve of Putin. Russia Two refers to more medium-sized cities with populations ranging from 50,000 to 250,000 people. These cities hold about 30% of Russia's population. Some cities in Russia Two have retained their industrial specialization during the post-Soviet times while others have not, but overall the Soviet-era values remain strong. These cities also employ people in the public sector and have different levels of economic development. Russia Two voted for Putin in 2012 because they value their stability more than anything else and remember the 1990s when workers would go unpaid for months. In Russia Two, liberal ideas of modernization are unpopular and the greatest value is a strong paternalist state and large-scale social policy. Russia Three is very rural and traditional and includes communities in villages and small towns with a population of less than 20,000. People in these regions compose about one-third of Russia's population. Education is lowest here and most work in agriculture or the public sector and there is the presence of a large shadow economy. This region is apolitical and always votes for the incumbent. Russia Four is another periphery that includes the North Caucasus and the south of Siberia with similar voting patterns. Only 5% of the total population lives in the former and 1% in the latter. These regions are very underdeveloped and are substantially different from the rest of Russia. Birth rates are very high, society is patriarchal and clan-based, ethnic differences are acute, and religion plays an important role.

The annexation of Crimea enjoyed massive public support from all Four Russias. Anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda has effectively turned all Four Russias against the West. The worsening economic situation can be blamed on foreign enemies, which works to the elite's advantage. Increased nationalism can justify tightening controls domestically and stricter policies toward the opposition, who are now referred to as "national traitors" (Putin 2014). Although some of the big cities are modern, surveys have shown that "supra-constitutional" values have remained very strong (North 1990). The nostalgia for the USSR is prevalent among older people but the imperial myth is also very present in the young people of Russia (Leon 2015).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter has demonstrated through an empirical presentation of data that adverse economic circumstances and increasing political restrictions did not have a negative effect on Putin's approval ratings as the latter showed a demonstrable spike in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea, arguing that an assertive foreign policy, along with a nationalist media rhetoric, has had positive effects on approval ratings. Security indicators continued to demonstrate their positive correlation with approval ratings. With these results, the following chapter will present this study's main argument through its unique theoretical framework.

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CHAPTER 4

Main Argument and Theoretical Analysis

Before stating the main argument and providing support for it through this study's theoretical framework, the following chart serves as a visual representation of the correlation between the domestic indicators and approval ratings and concludes that domestically, Putin's approval ratings remained stable across his entire time in power due to a high performing economy and increased security and were not affected by increased authoritarianism. However, as the economy plummeted and his approval ratings increased, the indicator of foreign policy was found to be the indicator with the most explanatory factor. This chart is a simplified measurement of the indicators as it only takes GNI per capita to measure economic performance, homicide rates to measure security, and Freedom House's freedom ratings to measure political repression. Nevertheless, it demonstrates an accurate perception of the state of affairs based on the empirical data this study has presented in the previous chapters. As one can see, approval ratings always remain above 60% but experience changes. Looking at the indicators of Freedom, homicide and GNI, these do not explain the spikes in Putin's popularity but they are representative of a stable overall positive approval rating. Homicide has a continuously downward trend, exhibiting a safer society, GNI per capita has a continuously upward trend with the exception of post 2014, exhibiting economic stability and prosperity, and freedom gradually decreases as the freedom rating went from a 5 in 2000 to a 6.5 in 2016, exhibiting less freedom in the society in exchange for heightened stability and security. These indicators all point toward the development of a safer and

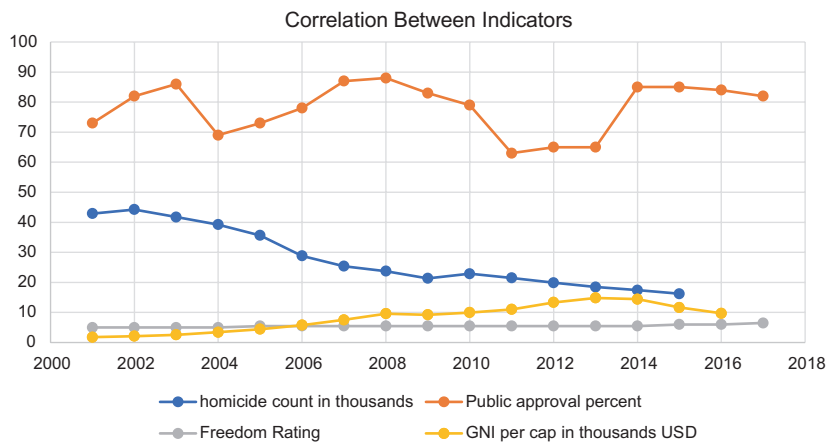


Fig. 4.1 Indicator correlations

more stable society with increased order (Levada Center 2017; Freedom House 2017; The World Bank 2017; UNODC 2017). These elements were lacking during Yeltsin’s tenure in the 1990s, as the second chapter of this study has illustrated which demonstrates that their presence helps to explain the reason for popular preference of Putin over Yeltsin. However, this study is interested in the 2014–2017 period, where the important indicator of economic prosperity has underperformed yet a noticeable spike in approval ratings that has remained high through today was noted. This period demonstrates the most stable trend in exceptionally high approval ratings for Putin. What explains this spike and its sustainability? Through the analysis of Putin’s foreign policy shifts, this study has come to the conclusion that its assertive foreign policy and demonstration of conservative values abroad has led to nationalist revival which is responsible for sustainably high approval ratings since 2014. Nevertheless, the reasons for his overall popularity can be explained through both the domestic and international variables as will be stated below (Fig. 4.1).

ARGUMENT SUMMARY

This study argues that the reason for Vladimir Putin’s high approval ratings has a twofold dimension. Domestically, Putin has created a safer, more orderly, more stable society that has increased the average Russian’s

standard of living through his centralization project. The more centralized the leadership became, the more efficient the state was run, earning Putin an increasingly positive reputation despite the increasing authoritarian tendencies that were required to achieve this. His leadership has been characterized as authoritarian and highly corrupt. The authoritarian feature in Russian government is not new as historically, with the exception of the Yeltsin years, Russia was always under centralized control. Russians take pride in “strong” leaders that display patriarchal qualities. Russians expect the state to take care of them, an important missing element during Yeltsin’s time in office. Putin has underlined Russia’s cultural and historical distinctiveness and has argued that Russia has different developmental needs and therefore different needs for forms of government than the West, an idea that the Russian citizens concur with according to the data demonstrated in this study. Putin’s creation of a ‘Sovereign Democracy’ has consolidated Russia’s domestic identity as being an arrangement closer to plebiscitary authoritarianism, a monarchy that is the voluntary legacy of the masses. Internationally, thanks to the consolidation of the sovereign democracy domestically and improved economic conditions, Putin was able to start acting more assertively. However, in 2014 the price of oil dramatically fell, and the Russian economy collapsed. In the past, economic performance was always a driver of Putin’s success, but this is no longer the case as the economy has been underperforming in the last three years. The reason for his continued and even increased approval ratings lies in the realm of identity and national self-esteem that Putin created. The Ukraine crisis became the representation of Russia’s long struggle with self-discovery. Through Putin’s actions, he was able to restore Russia’s ‘Great Power Status’ and create a strong sense of national identity and purpose by creating a counter movement to the West. Putin’s continued challenge of the Western-established world order and his criticism of Western hypocrisy and moral inferiority have created a valid framework for comparison between nations and have earned him international recognition.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Hybrid Regime

After the Cold War, many of the former Soviet states were described as “Competitive Authoritarian” regimes, which are a type of “Hybrid Regime” fitting neither into the description of a democracy nor a

full-blown authoritarian regime. These regimes did not all successfully transition into democracies and many of them remained in an “in-between” gray zone combining electoral competition with certain degrees of authoritarianism, electoral manipulation, unfair media access, abuse of state resources and biases toward the incumbent. In fact, of post-Soviet states, only three Baltic states are democratic today: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. A disenchantment with democracy has been noted in many parts of the world due to the inability of developing countries to reach democratic consolidation because of looming corruption, persisting violence, and institutional weakness. Some authors such as Fukuyama have suggested democracy to be the end of history and that democratizing countries are on a linear path to liberal democracy. A new strand of literature has instead emphasized the sustainability of the “hybrid regime.” Neighboring countries have viewed Putin’s framework as relatively attractive for their particular needs as a society. These needs include first and foremost the establishment of order, which in most cases of hybrid regimes can only be gained through centralization of power. This study is important for the future of hybrid regimes and suggests that this form of government is here to stay as it may increase the chances of the establishment of order. To stay in power, however, the leader must have the consent of the governed, and in Vladimir Putin’s case, he has it based on the establishment of order and safety, but also on the establishment of a strong national identity. This pattern has been noted in other countries as well where there has been a resurgence of nationalist sentiment, which encourages the sustainability of the given regime as it garners popular support. The inclusion of hybrid regime literature in this study is to demonstrate that Putin’s framework is highly attractive for many countries who already have similar regimes. Based on certain strategies to stay in power, including nationalist rhetoric and strong identity formation, these regimes are sustainable—bridging a gap between the study of regimes in Comparative Politics and Constructivism in International Relations. These findings also have an effect on the liberal democratic world order, whose objective was to democratize and liberalize the entire world. Though successful at spreading profusely, the movement was not quite able to spread everywhere—which means the liberal democratic world order will have to accept other identities in the globe and adapt to a more multipolar framework that differs on basic and fundamental values.

For an authoritarian regime to stay in power, it is important to deliver economically so that the population remains content with the

leadership—this arrangement has been named the “Authoritarian Bargain” (Desai et al. 2007). However, healthy economic development goes hand in hand with the creation of a healthier middle class which may start to demand political freedoms and civil rights, as the 2011–2012 political protests in Russia exemplified (Lipset 1959). This may pose some challenges for authoritarian regimes to stay in power. This framework was argued by scholars such as Seymour Martin Lipset, who first popularized the notion that economic growth leads to democratization by increasing the size of the educated middle class. Although development theorists such as Lipset may be right in assuming that increases in per capita income lead to increases in popular demand for political power, the power of the regime to undermine these changes is underestimated, as Putin’s regime has managed to quell these popular demands and gain high approval ratings despite increased repression.

Western development institutions, as well as Western governments, have claimed that globalization and the spread of market capitalism inevitably lead to the spread of liberal democracy everywhere. However, the results of such efforts do not show the spread and proliferation of liberal democracy. As is the case in Russia and China, Bueno de Mesquita et al. found that oppressive governments can stay in power with certain strategies. The provision of certain public goods is very important for the survival of the regime, while the withholding of others is equally necessary. Providing public goods such as freedom of the press and civil liberties, for one, will reduce the chances of regime survival. In fact, they noted that the greater the suppression of these ‘coordination goods’, the greater the lag between economic growth and the emergence of liberal democracy. Second, their study showed that providing public goods such as primary education, public transportation, and health care did not risk their survival. The study found that significant economic growth can be attained and sustained even while government suppresses “coordination goods,” in which cases the regime’s chances of survival improve and the likelihood of democratization decreases (Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2005). Additionally, the idea of rallying around a national identity is a technique that many authoritarian leaders have used in order to gain popularity ratings, a notion that Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov calls “negative mobilization.” Putin has used this technique in the past when experiencing faltering approval ratings or simply when trying to build them up initially, and many argue that he is using this technique again today. The first example of Putin’s demonstration of his ability to

be a 'strong' leader and protect Russia against 'external enemies' was at the beginning of his political career when he became Yeltsin's successor. Public approval ratings of his performance as prime minister increased from 31% in August 1999 to 80% in November of that same year after his harsh reaction to a series of apartment bombings supposedly perpetrated by Chechen terrorists. After the incident, Putin conducted a counterterrorist operation in the North Caucasus known as the Second Chechen War and riled up national fervor allowing him to win the presidential elections in March 2000. In 2008, after the Georgian war, Putin's ratings also reached a high of 88% (Volkov 2014). Thus, the tendency to consolidate around Putin in extraordinary circumstances has happened before. This study argues that the post-2014 environment is different from mere "negative mobilization" but demonstrates a long-term trend of Putin's popularity due to the consolidation of Russia's national identity which led to positive national self-esteem as will be explained shortly.

These theories have proven to be solid, but this study's contribution further adds to the literature by expanding on the importance of the provision of stability and order in a society as well as establishing a strong national identity to continue to garner positive approval in times of distress. Stability entails a relatively secure environment, a lack of chaos, leadership stability, and generally stable economic and living conditions. The decade of Russian economic prosperity certainly awarded Putin a lot of popularity points, but the population still approves of him today despite the economic recession because they view his leadership as having provided Russians with stability, order, and security, and are generally willing to "weather the storm" when it comes to less fruitful economic conditions. This argument has been supported through the data collected in conjunction with theories on the importance of providing order and stability as the basic foundations of society. Stability is the most important element in the life of a citizen of a country. Without stability, there cannot be any 'freedom' as one is not guaranteed their basic right to work, to healthcare, to shelter, to childcare, to retirement...One can argue that a state which does not fully provide these elements could also be 'restricting freedom' to its citizens, whether or not the state is considered a 'democracy'. If a hybrid regime manages to provide stability in a citizen's life, this study hypothesizes that it will generate positively inclined approval ratings. In addition, should such a regime possess fluctuations in that stability, be they economic, physical or existential, if there is a strong national identity built on the country's

particular historical trajectory and national values, the population will be more likely to support the leader through difficult times. It is important to note that each country possesses a unique history and possesses different developmental and political needs and may sometimes require a more centralized or authoritarian form of leadership, as long as the leadership remains respectful of its citizens and provides them with safety, order, and stability.

PRIORITIZING AND VALUING ORDER

As societies modernize, disorder can arise. If the process of social modernization is not accompanied by political and institutional modernization, violence and chaos may ensue due to the former's lack of capacity to manage the stresses of modernization (Huntington 1968). Modernization theory argues that economic change and development are the prime factors responsible for the creation of stable, democratic political systems. Modernization theory stresses not only the process of change but also the responses to that change. The capitalist version of modernization theorized that as nations developed, economic development and social change would lead to democracy. As Seymour Martin Lipset put it, "All the various aspects of economic development — industrialization, urbanization, wealth and education — are so closely interrelated as to form one major factor which has the political correlate of democracy" (Lipset 1963, p. 41). Huntington argues that economic development can be present without political development. Order itself is a crucial objective in developing countries. Order can exist in authoritarian regimes and democratic regimes as well as in socialist or free market societies. Huntington makes the argument that, while modernity equals stability, modernization is actually a cause for instability, due to urbanization, rising expectations due to literacy, education and the spread of media, and without adequate political institutions, chaos and violence will erupt, as it did in Russia under Yeltsin. Putin however, through his centralization project and his institutionalization of corruption, has been able to instill the necessary order which prevents chaos from occurring in the society, even if this meant resorting to more authoritarian tendencies. Russia has experienced high levels of urbanization (The United Nations Population Division 2010), has one of the highest rates of literacy in the world (Index Mundi 2017), and experienced high levels of economic growth in the 2000s yet did

not experience the chaos that accompanies these processes due to the effective order that Putin instilled in society. Without political order, neither economic nor social development could proceed successfully, as the 1990s demonstrated. Due to Russia's weak institutions after the fall of the USSR stemming from the power vacuum, along with the arrival of modernity and growth, its stability as a country suffered. The stability of society is founded on the institutions in place, and modernization and growth are destructive forces that can rip societies apart if strong political institutions are not in place (Huntington 1968). These forces could lead to political and social decay, failed states, coups, political violence, and stagnation. During the time of the USSR, the people and the government shared a vision of the public interest and the principle upon which political order was based, and there was a certain consensus on the legitimacy of the ruler. There is an overwhelming preoccupation with democratic institutions which the West always believed would be the solution to modernization. In contrast, Huntington states that in many modernizing countries, democratic institutions only exacerbate problems and tear down the structure of public authority. "*The primary problem is not liberty but the creation of a legitimate public order. Men may of course have order without liberty, but they cannot have liberty without order.*" (Huntington 1968, pp. 7–8). Although Communism did not and will not provide a more prosperous society, it can ensure effective authority. Though Russia is no longer Communist, Putin has implemented a centralized rule that provides the necessary order and toughness on security that the country needs. The 'heavy hand' provides order—order and security go hand in hand. Neither was provided under Yeltsin, yet this is the basic tenant of a functioning society.

A Hobbesian view of politics comes to mind here, where the strengthening of the state is seen as the basic foundation of social order (Hobbes 1904). "Social contract" arguments typically posit that individuals have consented, either explicitly or tacitly, to surrender some of their freedoms and submit to the authority of the ruler in exchange for protection of their remaining rights. It is important to consider that there may be prior needs to be fulfilled before a society can enjoy or even desire liberty. For Hobbes, it did not much matter whether threats to security came from within or outside one's own nation. A citizen looks to the state, therefore, for protection against both types of threats. Security for Hobbes was an absolute value. In exchange for providing it, the state can rightfully ask anything from a citizen save that he sacrifice his own life, for the

preservation of life is the essence of security. Due to the decrease in levels of crime, Russian society became safer than before. Russia does not quite measure to the OECD countries in terms of its public security, but it has certainly demonstrated a vast improvement over the years (OECD Better Life Index 2017).

CONTESTED BASIS OF SECURITY RELATIONS

Russia and the West have struggled with two competing narratives after the end of the Cold War. While the West believed its institutions, norms, and values to have prevailed, Russia sought a redefinition of the West to incorporate geopolitical and ideational pluralism and equality in the international system (Sakwa 2017). Former US President Bill Clinton's liberal belief that "great power politics" had ended, led him to continue with NATO enlargement, ignoring Realist warnings. Realist theory correctly predicted US behavior thereafter in its continuous containment of Russia in order to prevent it from challenging American hegemony. Realist theory posits that a "security dilemma" occurs when one state attempts to increase its security and precipitates another to respond defensively (Waltz 2000). Russia perceived NATO expansion as a threat and has reacted aggressively—a move which has aggravated threat perceptions of the Atlantic alliance. Moreover, Russia perceived the liberal international order to be domineering as it established supranational institutions and norms that began eroding the traditional international relations values of sovereignty, balance of power, diplomacy, and nationalism.

As the bipolar world order came to an end, the new American-led liberal international order became synonymous with international society. The aim of Russia today along with other anti-hegemonists is to decouple the synthesis of the institutions of international society and the liberal order. They advocate for pluralism and the autonomy of international society. These objectives have prompted Russia's "neorevisionist" behavior. The motivations of anti-hegemonists are multifold; but the fact that the Wilsonian form of liberal internationalism in the absence of any alternative became radicalized and resulted in military expeditions that destabilized entire regions, is of primary concern. Liberal institutional value spreading had negative repercussion not only in the regions themselves but also in Europe in the form of waves of refugees adding to the already plentiful economic migrants. The anti-hegemonist view can be described

as pertaining to the “Grotian” idea of international society. Contrary to the Hobbesian view, common institutions do constrain states from engaging in warfare; but unlike the Kantian perspective, states remain the central actors in the international system. The Grotian view allows for a combination of political realism and normative pluralism (Sakwa 2017).

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND RUSSIAN DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL IDENTITY

Social Identity Theory is a theory within Social Psychology that originated as a tool to analyze individuals and groups but evolved to apply to nation states. The theory posits that each person desires a positive self-image, which can be gained by identification with a group, and by favorable comparison of that in-group in relation to certain out-groups (Mercer 1995). Social Identity Theory on the level of International Relations posits that national political leaders can be expected to seek to establish a positive identity for their country. It incorporates the roles that perceptions of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ play in defining status and generating behavior toward others. The factors that contribute to the development of a collective self-esteem include intersubjective memories of the past national Self and the aspirations they generate for the future. These motivations are the basis from which political elites create national identities and interests. This in turn garners national self-esteem and furthers the elite’s preferred form of social order, especially during times of great change. The social elite promote their preferred national self-image in the public discourse through certain identity management strategies including social mobility, social competition, and social creativity. The discourse usually portrays a Self and an Other, a depiction that encourages a generally cooperative relationship toward “in-group members” and a generally competitive relationship with “out-group members.”

Russia’s behavior today can be defined using Clunan’s theory on “aspirational constructivism.” Historical memories of past international prestige, victimization or failures matter most in shaping a country’s national self-image and interests (Clunan 2012). Memories of the past shape a state’s current interests and aspirations. Although this process is particularly evident during political, social or economic changes, it is also apparent in normal times. Kahneman and Tversky state that people are more strongly motivated by aspirations to regain what they had in the past rather than to acquire what they never possessed (Kahneman and

Tversky 2000). Russia's aspirations to regain great power status have motivated its definition of the self and its interests abroad. Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian elite converged around the idea of regaining international great power status but acknowledged that internal rebuilding had to come first. Understanding this as Russia's primary motivation, rather than assuming its foreign policy choices are materially driven, helps to explain Russian fixation on the diminishing nature of US actions toward Russia. When Putin came into power, the Russian economy picked up and he was better able to entrench the elite consensus that the way forward in regaining great power status would only come with state strength and modernity (Clunan 2012). On this matter, Snetkov asserts that current Russian scholarship does not emphasize the important ties between domestic conditions and foreign policy actions enough—in other words, domestic and foreign security concerns are tightly interrelated sides of the same policy agenda (Snetkov 2015).

This study argues that due to a negative national self-esteem that formed through the management strategies of emulating the West or competing with them based on accepted norms, and receiving no recognition or respect, in recent years, Putin has used social creativity to change the frames of comparison, a strategy which has led to a positive national self-esteem and greatly contributes to his successful approval ratings and to his global impact. Through social creativity, Putin has managed to create an entirely different platform upon which to compare values, morality, leadership, and global stability. Through the emphasis of Russia's identity as being "Eurasianist" and "Civilizationist" and through the implantation of its "sovereign democracy" at home, Russia has portrayed their civilization and way of life as superior to that of the West. Rather than comparing itself to the West in terms of military, economic or political criteria, Eurasianism or Civilizationism invoke a new comparison that highlights Russia's uniqueness. By emphasizing their historical distinctiveness, proponents of Eurasianism propose a role for Russia as a harmonizer of the four civilizations that are considered a part of its "in-group."

Putin has positioned the West as a threat to Russia's "civilization" and its unique values and culture (Tsygankov 2016). The strategy that Putin has chosen signifies a decisive rejection of the assumption that Western societies should be viewed as the source of moral and political standards for Russia (Evans 2015, p. 401). This decisive turn in Putin's approach is what this study posits to be the main reason for his

popularity despite the economic woes and increasing authoritarianism. The new framework that Putin has created for the identity of his nation is highly supported and welcomed at home. Although Russian and Soviet leaders of the past have used all three management strategies and have possessed different views about Russia's identity, they all agree "that Russia belongs to the group of great powers, and believe that it is distinctive in its centuries-old unbroken great power status" (Clunan 2012, p. 7). In addition, there is a consensus among scholars that for most of Russia's intellectuals and political elite, the West is the most significant other (Tolz 1998, p. 995), serving as the main reference point (whether positive or negative) for Russia's definition of its identity. As of this moment, supporters of the political regime soon advocated the approval of a national ideology for Russia, despite the fact that the Constitution prohibits the adoption of a state ideology. Russia's new national ideology can be formed only on the basis of conservatism (Petrov 2014; Dobrenkov 2011, p. 15).

Western media often fail to differentiate between the various types of Russian nationalism that have existed historically (Kolsto and Blackkisrud 2016). Traditionally, Russian nationalism focused on the need to maintain a large and strong state. In opposition to this type of "statist" nationalism is the "ethno-nationalist." This group fights for the interests of the ethnic Russian people and possesses differing political goals. It has been argued that Putin's conservative turn is a shift toward "ethno-nationalism" from purely civic nationalism (Kolsto and Blackkisrud 2016). Putin's speeches after the annexation of Crimea have redefine the "national self" in a way that incorporates and emphasizes Russian ethnic factors such as language and culture (Blackkisrud 2016). In Putin's previous speeches, the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional aspects of Russian society were emphasized as being united under a common set of values and traditions. However, Blackkisrud argues that the 2013 Valdai Club Speech began to introduce ethnic undertones: "Russia's search for an identity lies in a national identity that is civic in nature based on shared values, a patriotic consciousness, civic responsibility and solidarity, respect for the law, communion with the fate of the Fatherland without losing touch with ethnic or religious roots" (Putin 2013). During this speech, Putin underlined the importance of how the "ethnic Russian" forms the core of Russia's state-centered identity. He made sure to emphasize the importance of the Russian language, the Russian people, the Russian culture and especially the Russian Orthodox church.

Nevertheless, Putin remains very strategic in maintaining the support of ethnic minorities and therefore does not put this rhetoric into practice. Blakkisrud argues that although Putin seems to have “upped the rhetoric” in Russia’s new ethno-national identity, he does not implement this rhetoric into policy as he does not think it would be beneficial for the survival of his regime (Blakkisrud 2016). Conversely, Laruelle argues that the main reasons for annexing Crimea were not ethnic ones primarily but the geopolitical competition with the West and NATO. In addition, the public support for this undertaking included vast numbers of ethnic minorities, demonstrating that the approval of such action is based on geopolitical and civilizational reasons rather than ethnicity. Laruelle rather interprets Russia’s identity shift as representing the leader of an anti-liberal Europe. Russia claims to be a European country with an anti-liberal identity and Laruelle argues that these two are not contradictory values. The Kremlin believes itself to be the representative of authentic European values that have been lost in the West. The Kremlin has adopted a morality-turn and has basically characterized itself as the “Christian Savior” of the West’s deteriorating values. This type of rhetoric has allowed Moscow to gain support from conservative groups in the West (Laruelle 2016).

Putin’s foreign policy shift was highly motivated by domestic factors and the growing dissatisfaction among the Russian population (Hill and Gaddy 2015, pp. 227, 230). In addition, Russia’s economic growth had slowed down since 2011 as well as household income, even prior to the fall in the price of oil and Western economic sanctions (Guriev 2015, p. 8). Therefore the entire political model for his leadership had to change. For some time, there had been an unspoken social contract where the years of high economic growth and raising standards of living pleased the population and allowed Putin more room to maneuver politically. However, the decline in his approval ratings upon his return to the presidency led to Putin’s conservative response. The 2011–2012 protests represented the point where Putin acknowledged a new strategy was needed, and the regime began to view the common folk as its greatest supporters rather than the middle class.

As of 2013, Putin’s adoption of the social creativity strategy to achieve international status signaled that Russia no longer cared about Western perception of its actions (Evans 2015). In fact, Putin regarded the values that had become dominant in the West as inferior to those that, according to him, are supported by Russian society. Economic sanctions and

condemnation from the West gave Putin more of a reason to create an external enemy and persuade the majority of Russians to unite and reinforce the credibility of the regime's campaign to portray the opposition as disloyal and beholden to foreign governments. This strategy of conservative messaging has proved effective and has helped the stability of the regime. His main priority has thus shifted from a more economic base to a cultural base, waging cultural warfare with the West. Putin is using social creativity by claiming that his foreign policy is superior to that of the West, as the West's only involves US global dominance while Putin's seeks global stability. He also insists that his regime's conservative stance on morality has evoked a positive response from other countries. He has therefore chosen a different set of criteria of comparison with major Western powers. Instead of focusing on economic and democratic development, he focuses on more traditional conservative approaches to global stability and moral superiority. In that way, he believes Russia should be assessed in a favorable light while Western states in a negative light (Evans 2015).

Prior to the Ukraine crisis, Russia could have considered itself as part of Eurasia, the Euro-Atlantic and Asia Pacific. However, the crisis has shifted geopolitical thinking, no longer making the Euro-Atlantic region an appropriate space to which to belong. The leaders of Russia believe Russia to be a major power in the international system and refuse to be secondary to the main powers of the globe. The Ukraine crisis brought to light that the US-Russian rivalry is still an issue and that Russia's membership in the Euro-Atlantic space was never fully consolidated or taken seriously (Clunan 2012). This sentiment of rejection and exclusion, coupled with the Ukraine crisis, went hand in hand with Russia's new Eurasian discourse and the expansion of Eurasian integration (Trenin 2015). While Russia still strives for Great Power status, Moscow no longer feels the need to be a member of each of the three geopolitical spaces. Instead, it needs its own integration project.

It is impossible to speak of Putin's foreign policy actions without mentioning Alexandr Dugin. Dugin is a Russian political scientist with close ties to the Russian government. He is seen as the author of Putin's annexation of Crimea (Newman 2014). On October 10, 2014, Dugin said, "Only after restoring the Greater Russia that is the Eurasian Union, can we become a credible global player. Now these processes slowed down very much. The Ukrainian Maidan was the response of the West to the advance of the Russian integration" (Sooner 2015). He described

the Euromaidan as a *coup d'état* carried out not by the Ukrainians but by the United States: “America wishes to wage the war against Russia not by its own hands but by the hands of the Ukrainians...The United States carried out the *coup d'état* during the Maidan for the purpose of this war... The United States raised neo-Nazis Russophobes to the power for the purpose of this war” (Alcetron 2017). For Dugin, several civilizational spaces exist: Eurasia, Africa, the Far East, and Europe. With applied regionalism, nations can retain their autonomy within their civilizational space, yet retain the gains made by globalization while retaining local and regional sovereignty. The result is a multipolar world. Dugin and his Eurasian philosophy are important elements of Putin’s foreign policy objectives. The values that Eurasianism encompass include collective identity, non-alignment in global affairs, the civilization as the political unit and the essentialism of culture. Russians possess mixtures of Slav, Mongol and Turkish blood making them an intermediary between Europe and Asia or even Europe and the third world (Shlapentokh 2007). In Eurasianism, the state should partially control the economy with a mixed public-private ownership blueprint, and finally the Eurasian idea is one that both defines those within it as well as excludes those outside of it. In this case, the “Other” is the “West.” The West’s values in comparison are: egocentrism, democracy and liberalism as intertwined, materialism and secularism in public and economic life, utilitarianism, messianic liberalism, the “state” as bureaucratic and administrative, the use of liberal rhetoric to mask the totalitarian ideological core of liberalism, and politicians as windows dressing for economic elites. In addition, when the economy fails, the politicians who in fact control nothing are said to be at fault, and evolution serves to secularize society, justify colonialism, industrial capitalism and “competition.” “Rationality” is defined in purely economic terms. “Science” and the “scientific establishment” are treated as identical and is identical with the concept of “intelligibility.” Liberalism rejects the “nation” as fiction, yet the “international community” and the isolated ego are palpable realities (Geopolitika 2017). As can be seen, these views of the world are antithetical. The West views itself as a representation of human liberty, while seeing the East as in need of Western assistance. Eurasianism posits that evolution is leading the world to the Western idea, which was the purpose of the Darwinian system from the beginning and that it is no accident that this view of the world arose from the height of English colonial rule and industrial development. Capitalism sees the world merely as a series of

markets or resource bases to control and people are treated in purely quantitative terms.

Through this description and analysis of civilizationist values, as expressed by Dugin and Eurasianists, it is not surprising that Russians actually view their society as respecting human freedoms, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter. It is possible that they simply have another definition of freedom than the West and rather perceive Western society to be “totalitarian.” Eurasianism holds representative government as an important factor. It is different from democracy, though, as Eurasianists view democracy as being a mask for economic power. A strong Russian executive can help filter the demands of the monied class and seek the common good. Putin’s approach has mirrored this demand (Shlapentokh 2007). Putin is a strong supporter of the non-aligned movement which emphasizes the independence of nation states in a global society which is distinct from Westernism. In Russian Eurasianism, the main foreign element is the “multipolar” world shared by the non-aligned movement and its dedication to alter global capitalism and Westernism. Through the West’s new world order and end of history rhetoric, it is implying that the West alone has the right to shape the rules of the political system or decide what is considered a developed or a developing country. The Soviet use of domestic force to rapidly develop heavy industry made it a developed country, though one that did not develop according to the typical pattern of European states.

There is no clear connection between liberalism and representation; that is, there is no reason to believe that a democratic government is necessarily a representative government. The Russian nationalist movement, in general, and Eurasianists, in particular, normally hold that liberalism is about ideology and the interests of capital, not the protection of rights. A state can be highly representative without being a democracy, and a democracy can enshrine an oligarchy rather than “the people.” The Eurasianists are fairly cynical about Western claims to tolerance and “universal values.” Eurasianist philosophy as it corresponds to Russia and Putin’s rule emphasize that laws cannot come from mere self-interest or utility, but must be representative of the popular will. The popular will is not necessarily manifest in elections, but shows the broader contours of social life over time. The General Will is the public good, and it differs from the mere counting of votes and might even be opposed to it (Kullberg and Zimmerman 1999, pp. 323–358). The Eurasian idea is central to Russian politics and most citizens agree that a special form of

democracy should be cultivated in Russia, one that adheres to Russian cultural and historical values. This special form of democracy is in itself more autocratic than liberal forms of democracy, but seems to appeal to the masses. A new identity is being forged in Russia, and, judging by the popularity of Vladimir Putin, the basic elements of Eurasianism seem to be accepted as its basis.

This identity is not only external, but internal. The Constructivist view of sovereignty asserts that sovereignty is a socially and culturally constructed concept. After the fall of the USSR, a new form of sovereignty began to emerge in Russia, particularly when it came to the idea of intervening in other states' internal affairs (Ziegler 2012, pp. 400–417). Especially since the Color Revolutions, Russia's concept of sovereignty has evolved. In the 1990s, Russian policies contained undemocratic undertones but were always masked as being pro-Western and pro-democratic. However, once the Color Revolutions occurred, the veil was removed and replaced by a direct challenge to international democracy. Vladislav Surkov, the First Deputy of the Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration in 2006, expanded the debate on democratization and explained the Russian alternative to Western liberal democracy to the West. The main points were that Russian democratic development does not and will not conform to Western standards, and sovereignty takes precedence over democracy. Those are the two main values of 'Sovereign Democracy' (Petrov 2005, pp. 181–182).

In the president's speech to the federal assembly in 2005, Russia officially proclaimed itself to be a 'Sovereign Democracy' (Putin 2005). This embodies many factors both domestically and in terms of foreign policy. Sovereign democracy can be considered the Russian version of European civic nationalism. Its main pillars include natural resources, the memory of the Soviet victory in WWII and the promise of sovereignty. The concept of sovereignty for the Kremlin refers to the state's capacity in terms of economic independence, military strength, and cultural identity. A sovereign state also possesses a nationally minded elite with a nationally minded democratic theory. In Moscow's view, small states such as Poland or Bulgaria have no capacity to be sovereign and naturally gravitate around sovereign poles of power. Weak countries are incapable of exercising sovereignty over their domestic affairs and therefore become reliant on strong states, multinational corporations and other powerful global actors. Russia aims to avoid this fate. For Surkov, democracy is inseparable from national freedom. Or in other words, personal freedom

cannot be separated from national freedom. State sovereignty takes precedence over popular sovereignty. Russia wants to avoid the ‘unconstrained transnationalization of Russia’s economic and political assets’ that will result in the loss of nationhood and the country’s involuntary dissolution through globalization rather than voluntary participation in the process.

Putin’s view of sovereign democracy can be described as reminiscent of the Soviet past. Putin has often depicted the USSR as a heroic and constructive page in the history of the Russian people. He often nostalgically talks about the Soviet era as one full of honor and power and idealized Joseph Stalin as a great leader who modernized the country and defeated the Nazis. Putin has taken certain actions to rehabilitate certain aspects of the Soviet past under the guise of Russian patriotism. As early as 2000, when Putin took power, he reinstated the Soviet national anthem. Additionally, he has restored Soviet-era symbols and rewritten government-sponsored textbooks to paint Stalin in a largely positive light. Stalin’s popularity rose from 12% believing he was the most influential figure in Russian history in 1989 to 42% in 2012 (Bershidsky 2013). Putin’s project is deeply rooted in the image of an idealized Soviet past as the golden age of Russian statehood, thus explaining his reference to the collapse of the USSR as being ‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century’ (Putin 2005).

In constructing the intellectual justification for the model of sovereign democracy, Kremlin ideologues turned to the intellectual legacy of continental Europe, namely the works of Francois Guizot and French political rationalism and Carl Schmitt’s “decisionism” (Krastev 2007). Surkov is attracted to their anti-revolutionism and their mistrust in the idea of representation as the expression of the pluralist nature of the modern society and the idea of popular sovereignty that defines democracy as the rule of the popular will, two concepts of the present democratic age. The current regime in Moscow can be described as anti-populism and anti-pluralism in these senses. Democracy, according to Schmitt and the theorists of sovereign democracy, is the “identity of the governors and the governed” (Krastev 2007). According to Guizot, “sovereign” entails the reason embodied in the consensus of the responsible national elites (Krastev 2007). The Kremlin does not think in terms of the citizen’s rights, but in terms of the population’s needs. The concept of population is contrasted both to the notion of rights at the core of the liberal democratic project and the notion of “the people” that is at the core of the nationalist projects. Schmitt’s definition of the sovereign is “he who

decides on the state of exception” (Krastev 2007), which doesn’t allow a meaningful distinction between democracy and dictatorship. This fits Russia’s style of leadership and the importance that it places on the president. Russia’s concept of sovereign democracy embodies its ambition to be ‘the other Europe’, or an alternative to the European Union, not to break with European tradition. This project has demonstrated to be very attractive for many in post-Soviet Europe, but also represents an existential challenge to the European Union. Rather, Russia can be categorized as “very old Europe,” as Trenin has written and “could be reminiscent of Germany in the 1920s, with its vibrancy and intense feelings of unfair treatment by others; France in the 1940s, when it was trying to heal its traumas; or Italy in the 1960s, as far as the nexus of power, money, and crime is concerned” (Trenin 2007). Russia embodies nostalgia for the old European nation state and nostalgia for a European order organized around the balance of power and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states. The current tension between Russia and the West can be considered ideological in nature. Only, it is not a conflict between democracy and dictatorship, but rather between the postmodern state embodied by the EU and Putin’s regime of sovereign democracy. This concept of sovereign democracy has been adopted by the Putin administration. Surkov stated that Russia is linked to European civilization, but has adopted a specifically Russian version of that civilization (Trenin 2007).

Russian society is distinct and cannot conform to Western norms and models. According to Surkov, Russian democracy has been constructed on a historical foundation of national statehood which is instinctively centralized (Surkov 2008, p. 81). Russian civilization is rooted in European civilization, but forms a distinct variety of it. Authoritarianism and centralization are necessary to maintain Russian sovereignty: “The consolidation and centralization of power were necessary to preserve the sovereign state and turn it around, away from oligarchy and toward democracy” (Surkov 2008, pp. 82–86). Democracy is interlocked with sovereignty, democracy being personal freedom and sovereignty being national freedom. However, for Russia, state sovereignty surpasses popular sovereignty. Without a strong executive, Russia would fragment and descend into chaos. Russia faces serious threats to its sovereignty due to its richness in natural resources and its possession of nuclear weapons, making outsiders more susceptible to invade or influence the state. Russia’s reaction to the Color Revolutions demonstrates how the state

views outside interference in its affairs and the affairs of the states in its sphere of interest (Surkov 2008, pp. 82–86). Although the concept of “Democracy” has not been suspended from official Russian political discourse, there have been measures taken to restrict it. The achievement of democracy in political debate has been correlated with modernization and national progress. Casula states that Western governments like the USA introduced this theory into the wider political discourse to increase the occurrence of democratic transitions across the world. The reasons why there have been measures taken to restrict democracy in political practice is because sovereign democracy views the world through the lens of Realism in International Affairs. Or in other words, as a lawless and dangerous place structured around competition; therefore, democratic practices must be suspended to preserve the sovereign state (Casula 2012, pp. 3–15).

Valerii Zorkin, the current Chairman of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, claimed:

In this sense, we really found ourselves in a chaotic world in which everything has become unpredictable. In this anomic global chaos, there is only one law—the law of the strong and aggressive: the superpowers, dictators, and leaders of mafia-like and terrorist groups. (Zorkin 2006, p. 45)

The sovereign democracy discourse possesses an internal dimension as well. Surkov states that internal sovereign democracy is:

A type of political life for the society in which the state, its organs and activities are chosen, formed and directed exclusively by the Russian nation with all its many forms and unities, in order to achieve the material well-being, freedom and justice for all citizens, social groups and peoples who form that nation. (Surkov 2006)

Meaning that this concept is of vital importance to the population of Russia, as well. Sovereign democracy views the population as a collective entity which embodies a whole nation rather than the Western perspective that posits that each citizen pursues their private interests for the good of the nation. In other words, the Russian citizen must “bow to the will of the nation” (Richter 2008, pp. 1–56). Surkov maintains that true freedom can only be obtained when “the nation of which he is a part is also free in a justly structured world” (Surkov 2006, p. 48).

The Russian elite views civil society as lacking the capacity to carry out its collective will and that it is the role of the government to carry out that will. This must be accomplished by a strong leader according to Surkov: “strong personalities often compensate for the collective’s ineffectiveness, the lack of mutual trust and self-organization” (Surkov 2006, p. 48). Vlad Ivanenko, a political analyst, explains sovereign democracy as an arrangement that includes both elite and ordinary citizens in society. The role of the elite is to keep the state together and deal with threats. Because of such responsibility, they are allowed to control the majority of the national wealth and rule unopposed (Ivanenko 2007).

Morozov argues that the domestic identity depends on the negation of Yeltsin’s “democracy” as a period of chaos and destruction (Morozov 2008, p. 156). Western notions of democracy and liberalism have been framed as being associated with the Yeltsin era, which people view as being chaotic and as a way for the West to undermine Russian sovereignty, which allows Putin more leeway to implement his political ideals (Casula 2012, pp. 3–15). Surkov accused the West of undermining Russian sovereignty in the 1990s by supporting ‘democracy; at the expense of social stability’ (Surkov 2006). The population of Russia today demonstrates very high approval ratings for Vladimir Putin, standing at 86%, the highest of any leader in the world (The Levada Center 2017). Through the creation of this ‘strong state’, Putin has garnered political success. The more the state became centralized, the safer Russia was, and the less crime was reported. Although many Western scholars believe that Russia’s ‘strong state’ system is dysfunctional and should be replaced by a Western-style competitive system, there is a certain pragmatic functionality of this state type that works for Russia. Pro-Western scholars would argue that such a system forms a system of personal rule that silences the voices of the population and deepens divisions between the ruling circles, making the system more prone to being internally unstable and breeding future political crises. However, the *krysha* system that Putin practices prevents that very division from happening, as the President possesses the loyalty of the elite and of organized crime groups.

Not only are competitive systems sometimes not very effective, but they can also imply nontransparent power for business lobbies rather than for the people. Western systems are often ruled by corrupt oligarchical elites on behalf of an increasingly shrinking middle class. Tsygankov argues that the strong state is just another political system

and institutional arrangement to concentrate and distribute human resources in the interests of the common good. All governments must balance citizens' demands for order and security with those of individual and group rights, only the strong state does this by relying on centralized and concentrated authority of the executive rather than on checks and balances. Although some strong states have proven to be ineffective and neglected certain needs for internal development, others have capitalized on their system's advantages. China's strong state has been effective at generating economic growth, investing state capital, fighting corruption and capital flight and observing rules for transferring power. Additionally, democratic institutions and political openness are not sufficient for providing a system's stability and may prove to be destabilizing such as was the case during Gorbachev's Perestroika or in the establishment of the provisional government in 1917. These examples are proof of system breakdown rather than successful reform. Russia can instead remain being a strong state and focus on increasing its effectiveness rather than go through total reforms.

As Tsygankov argues, historically, Russia's strong state has allowed it to achieve the successes it has. It has sustained strong external pressures by becoming a politically sovereign nation. It has avoided colonization and has emerged as a great power. Russia has always been a maker rather than a taker of international rules. Russians have learned to fight militarily and fund their military above policy priorities. In addition, since the 1700s, Russia has emerged as a late developer, or a semiperipheral country struggling to overcome its backwardness relative to better developed Western economies, and without a strong state the country will continue to be a resource-oriented economy and will fail to mobilize in the correct manner to sustain competition with more advanced economies. Culturally and historically a decentralized state with weak social obligations is at odds with what Russians have supported. Russians are mentally accustomed to a strong state. For centuries, the Russian state has had the need to diffuse foreign threats, has needed to develop and populate the world's largest territory and guarantee a certain standard of living for the population, all the while maintaining the high level of diversity that exists within its borders. If the state fails to deliver on these obligations, Russians are more likely to support politicians who promise social order and stability rather than those favoring Western-style individual rights. Russians today hold a more positive view of Soviet leaders such as Brezhnev and Stalin than of Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Russians

romanticize the Soviet system because of the system's ability to deliver state paternalism and the ability to withstand special interests for the benefit of the public. Additionally, they continue to aspire to achieve international recognition of their independence, uniqueness and capabilities. The challenge is to preserve strong governance without sacrificing business or public initiative. Only a state that is strong will be able to address Russia's formidable problems and prevent prolonged instability. The modern meaning of the 'strong state' is similar to Catherine the Great's maxim: "the purpose of autocracy is not to deprive people of natural liberty, but to steer their actions toward the greatest good" (Tsygankov 2014).

Through increasing authoritarianism, through institutionalized corruption, through the centralization project and the formation of a 'sovereign democracy', Putin has created a new and strong identity for Russia that has evolved into being considered an alternative to liberal Western democratic governance. Putin, in other words, has legitimized his regime from the inside out. Through the strategy of social creativity, Putin has now turned Russia's identity onto a "civilizationist" path, one that cannot be compared to the current group of countries with the highest rankings, or to any country at all for that matter except perhaps the former USSR. Through his rhetoric in undermining the West and its institutions and form of government, Putin has re-framed the perception of his 'corrupt authoritarianism' into a form of government that prioritizes sovereignty, civilization, and traditional values. The West in turn is framed as a value-less, corrupt landscape where democracy and freedom are used as a façade for world domination.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Putin's centralization project has proved to be popular and efficient at home and has embodied the 'strong state' that Russians desire to have. Through his rhetoric and his actions as well as with the support of those who concur with his ideals, Putin has challenged Western norms of democracy, liberalism, and regime change for the sake of human rights, into a new platform positing that it is morally superior not to spread democracy and liberalism over the world and to respect each other's sovereignty and ways of life as the former masks desires for global hegemony and dominance. Liberalism has lost credibility in the world as people have become afraid of mass migration, terrorism, democratic

stalemate and corrupt elections. For example, through ‘meddling’ in the US presidential elections in 2016 (CNN 2017), there is now mass media attention on the US government and its lack of election integrity which has sowed doubt in the minds of the public on whether their elected President won fairly and whether a great power was actually able to be influenced by a lesser power who may have affected the results of the elections. By denying his involvement (Miller 2017), Putin mocks the great power of the world and makes the US appear paranoid and guilty of spreading fake stories out of the democratic party’s incapacity to accept their loss in the 2016 elections. These events have created such division within the US government, that the continued in-fighting only undermines liberal democracy and strengthens Putin’s ideal of a strong and unified state under centralized rule. Putin’s hopes are that what is happening in the US represents the first steps in the moral demise of liberal democracy and its credibility while Putin sits back and lets the reputation of Western institutions collapse from within. In the last year, portrayals of both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump as being morally corrupt (Matthews 2016) have led to questioning the integrity of the US political system entirely. While the west appears morally corrupt, Russia maintains stability and high approval ratings of their leader with very little in-fighting. Today, it has been demonstrated that a country doesn’t have to be economically superior or democratic to appear powerful anymore. Russia has now come out as appearing strong despite its economic woes and authoritarian regime all through its cultural warfare and media manipulation, which have managed to change platforms of comparison and accepted norms.

Through social creativity, Putin has consolidated Russia’s identity in the world whose priorities are in line with Eurasian philosophy and social conservatism and has challenged the global status quo on a variety of issues. Putin represents an alternative framework to liberal democracy that is quite attractive for some countries. Due to the importance of stability, order, and security, many may prefer a more centralized form of government if their democratization efforts have not led to those outcomes. Putin strongly believes in the internal sovereignty of different nations and criticizes Western domination of world affairs. His assertiveness on the global front in the last few years have won him popularity at home and in the world, as he is often mentioned in Western media and was even named the most powerful man of the year by Forbes magazine in 2016 (Ewalt 2017).

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Conclusion, Further Discussion, and Avenues for Future Research

The indicators that were examined in this study were economic performance, levels of political repression, the security environment and foreign policy in relation to presidential approval ratings. The indicators illustrated that improvements in security and the economy had a positive correlation with high approval ratings during Putin's first and second term. They also indicated that rising authoritarianism also had a correlation with high approval ratings. In other words, Putin's ratings remained high throughout most of his time as president while the country saw improved security, improved economic performance and increasing centralization and authoritarianism. However, economic downturn and increased political repression were seen to be positively correlated with *increased* approval ratings after 2014. In other words, Putin's ratings went up dramatically from an average of about 65 to 85%. This study is not stating that these relationships are causal, but is stating that there is a reason that goes beyond economic performance and bypasses levels of political repression to explain Putin's increased popularity in recent times. This study has concluded that the answer lies within the realm of 'identity' and involves both domestic and international characteristics that have kept in line with Russia's particular historical trajectory. But it also lies within the realm of order and stability, which forms part of Russia's domestic identity, as Russia has been observed to prioritize these values due to its historical trajectory.

Domestically, this identity emphasizes the efficacy of a centralized system that is ruled by an all-powerful figure that has re-instated order

and stability in Russian society. This system is highly reliant on a form of institutionalized corruption that has created elite cohesion and a stable order that hasn't been seen since the Soviet Union. Putin's power domestically resembles that of a 'distant tsar', a form of leadership that Russia has always been accustomed to historically. He represents a father-like figure that must be obeyed and respected. One cannot criticize the president in Russian media. Though this is the antithesis to democracy in liberal democracies, in Russia it creates a form of stability as the leader is always portrayed in a positive light and as protecting the best interests of the population as a whole. Internationally, Putin's challenge to the established order and his prioritizing of Russian interests is restoring national pride. He has restored a 'Great Power' identity through his assertive foreign policy and constant challenging of the established order. Putin's actions internationally are also gaining legitimacy in some circles, which is stirring up a debate on truth and established international norms. Russians are proud that their global standing has increased, as they have always viewed themselves as a great power and the 1990s after the fall of the USSR was a time of shame.

Putin has exploited the economic insecurity and the Soviet nostalgia to his advantage and has managed to garner nationalist sentiment and a new Russian identity that reveres its Soviet roots more than ever. The use of the Kremlin-controlled media has proved to be a powerful tool. Putin's involvement in the near and far abroad has demonstrated actions from a so-called "great power" with military might and has reinforced feelings of Soviet nationalism. Putin restored the values that Russians care about most, which include stability, the integrity of their country, their sphere of influence in international relations, and standing up to US domination. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, poll respondents stated Putin's popularity was mostly about Russia's global standing. With an improved defense industry and the annexation of Crimea, Russians regained their military sea base on the Black Sea, protecting itself from NATO expansion. Russians have regained self-respect and national pride after their chaotic times in the 1990s.

The concept of sovereign democracy became the central ideology during the presidential and duma elections in 2007 and 2008. The Western world consistently insists on a specific model of democracy, one that was established in Europe in the modern era. It is built around the principles of individualism and liberty and has guided Western civilization since the modern era began. The basic tenants of Russia possessing its own

form of democracy, which more closely resembles “competitive authoritarianism,” are justified by the fact that Russia has its own historical trajectory and society. At the Munich conference, Putin challenged the contemporary state of affairs in international politics. This has been done in the past by other world leaders, but not as much attention was given to them as it was to Russia, a country that occupies vast territory, controls energy resources and possesses a large nuclear arsenal. Coming from Russia, this was taken as a threat to the US, NATO, the energy charter and the entire world order. Throughout the speech, Putin stated that the unipolar system the world finds itself in after the Cold War is inadmissible, that the ballistic missile system created in Europe by the US is not directed at North Korea but at Russia, that NATO is not a partner but an enemy and a destabilizer, and that the energy charter being forced upon Russia is ensuing access to Russian energy resources without giving Russia access to European ones in return. Putin has masterfully securitized the West in this way and has portrayed it as an external enemy that risks destabilizing the country internally, the way he says it has destabilized Ukraine. Successfully securitizing a political ‘threat’ goes hand in hand with a charismatic appeal. This has allowed Russia to juxtapose its identity with that of the West, stating that their civilization is unique and different from the ‘Other’, a tactic that has riled up national sentiment in support of their leader. This tendency was observed more than ever after 2014, as the country suffered an economic crisis.

Although the current economic difficulties have certainly affected the average citizen, the economic situation in Russia has not reached the instability of the 1990s, a time to which Russians fear returning. Putin’s centralization project is therefore legitimate. In other words, Putin is the father of Russian stability and Russians appear to trust his leadership regardless of the manner in which he carries it out. Though some scholars believe this regime to be on the verge of collapse (Motyl 2016), this study argues that the regime is highly sustainable in its hybridity, network organization, and centralized power. Though the regime may survive without Putin, it is unlikely to survive without a Putin-like leader that espouses similar leadership techniques. He has kept the country relatively safe and has built political stability, thus legitimizing his form of rule despite international critique. There is an overwhelming consensus that he has done the country good and that he is the type of leader that the culture needs. In fact, it has been argued by Russian scholars that due to the country’s enormous size and ethnically diverse population,

Russian unity and its so-called “collective” society is actually not unified or collective by nature and needs a supreme leader to unite them. The following survey data demonstrate that Russians are actually not unified by nature and do not trust each other. A 2013 survey asked 1600 Russians what group they identified themselves with the most, 32% said they were “their own person and didn’t identify with any group.” The next category, 11%, identified themselves not as Russians, but as the middle class. Just 4% identified themselves as ethnic Russians (Arutunyan 2013). Interpersonal trust among Russians is considerably lower than among populations in other countries. According to the Levada Center, only 27% of Russian respondents said that they believed other people should be trusted. That figure was 69% in Sweden, 42% in the USA, and an average of 45% among 29 countries (Gudkov 2012). In addition, statistics on how likely Russians were to get involved in voluntary work to help strangers in their community were quite low. According to two studies in 2011 and 2012, between 1 and 3% of Russians said they had volunteered through NGOs in the past year. When informal voluntary work was factored in, a 2011 poll found that less than 15% of the Russian population volunteered (Arutunyan 2013). All this information challenges the notion that the society is innately collectivist. Moreover, there are 21 internal, non-Russian ethnic republics, some of whose residents do not speak Russian. The various ethnic, economic, and social interests, sprawled out over one-sixth of the world’s land-mass, led Russia scholar Natalia Zubarevich to conclude that there are in fact four Russias instead of one (Zubarevich 2013a, b). Though scholars have tried to explain authoritarianism in Russia as being an extension of Russian intrinsic collectivism, it is perhaps through the very nature of their lack of collectivism that an authoritarian supreme leader can triumph. Authoritarianism may be what arises in the absence of political ties between people (Arutunyan 2014). The more the society lacks ties and bonds and communication networks, the more they will rely on a ‘Caesar’-like figure to step in where society has failed. Separateness and atomization therefore produce a compensatory collectivization, which is something the West needs to understand about Russian society and other similar societies (Arutunyan 2014).

Post-Soviet countries under authoritarian leadership have viewed Putin’s framework as relatively attractive. This study has implications for similar hybrid regimes who view their developmental needs as distinctive from that of the West’s. By the end of 2008, Russia had rebuilt

its economy and had established economic power and influence over the Commonwealth of Independent States and post-Soviet space. Its economic might gave it the capacity to afford centralization and non-conformity with the West, unlike Yeltsin's time when the country was reliant on Western aid. It also gave it the capacity to influence countries in the near abroad. Moscow believes that Russia has competing value systems with the West and that different development models require different forms of governance (Medvedev 2008). Its self-identification as a 'sovereign democracy', distinct from the West, has created a platform on which all Putin's actions can be legitimized, including his aspirations of returning to a great power. The nature of the state that has taken root can be defined as increasingly authoritarian. The state has increased its centralization of power and has seen an increase in networks of power that have replaced prior oligarchs and business elites with state elites dispersed at the top levels of the private sector. These individuals, due to their KGB background and loyalty to Putin, have come to own the majority of state businesses and have a say in all political decisions. This can be defined as corruption in high places or elite corruption and is in sync with increasing authoritarianism in Russia. However, it has also become part of the Russian state definition of its 'sovereign democracy' and how the country is run, which has mostly resulted in an increasing amount of political stability and high levels of approval throughout the country.

The political stability may be due to a variety of reasons, one being the elite cohesion of interests that results from Putin's network. If all those in power share the same agenda and continue to benefit monetarily from the state, there is no reason for a split in the elite, which has been part of the cause of many revolutions throughout history (Skocpol 1979). Additionally, due to the instability that occurred in the 1990s, the Russian population has come to appreciate the stability in the country and may fear change. Also, the authoritarian nature of the regime, which represses freedom of speech and thought, has discouraged dissent throughout the country. Though anti-liberal and anti-democratic, this has also led to a certain form of stability, as there is no room for political debate. Lack of Western notions of freedom and democracy are not necessarily negative, especially if there is popular consensus. Developing countries that have undergone democratic transitions often face extreme difficulties and instability, and therefore may benefit from accepting a hybrid regime as the best political and development model for their needs. In Russia, the fact that Putin is so popular shows that the average

Russian trusts the supreme authority. This relationship can be considered a stable monarchical trend, reflecting the high demand of the authoritarian figure (Dugin 2012). Putin is seen as the patriarch or the father of a large family in which he is the head. This metaphor suggests that in that structure, the father figure possesses a “stable authoritarian status” rendering the rest of the family to be submissive and complicit. When the head of a state demonstrates the “required virtues” to make this possible, the public conscious adopts a mentality of complicit patriarchal authoritarianism. According to Dugin, the monarchic tendency of the masses creates conditions for authoritarian rule through a democratic process that gives the power back to the father figure. This process expresses the traditionalism of the society and does not undermine the legitimacy for the democratic procedure. Monarchy can be legal in Russia within the framework of a democratic procedure. Dugin calls this “plebiscitary authoritarianism” or a monarchy that is a voluntary legacy of the masses. Putin is on the threshold of a new role as a man of destiny as were Charles de Gaulle and Josef Stalin. Drawing his power from society, he is guided by the formula “I am the state, the people and the society” (Dugin 2012).

An important tool of the regime in the coming years will continue to be its assertive foreign policy. Economic hardship will be easier to justify in the presence of external enemies. Putin’s popularity is vital to his regime’s stability and legitimacy. “Faith in the rating supersedes all. Political institutions, ideologies, in fact, the state itself,” political scientist Aleksandr Kynev said in a recent article (Kinev 2015). Putin may also be helped by the fact that some Russians, according to a recent study, think about political power differently than people in the West: Russians see the tsar as distant, almost sacral, hopefully benevolent, and above the law, not bound by it (Arutunyan 2014). They appeal to him to make things right in a system over which they have no control. Historically, the Russian state has had the need to diffuse foreign threats, has needed to develop and populate the world’s largest territory and guarantee a certain standard of living for the population, all the while maintaining the high level of diversity that exists within its borders. If the state fails to deliver on these obligations, Russians are more likely to support politicians who promise social order and stability rather than those favoring Western-style individual rights. Russians today hold a more positive view of Soviet leaders such as Brezhnev and Stalin than of Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Additionally, they continue to aspire to achieve international

recognition of their independence, uniqueness, and capabilities. The challenge is to preserve strong governance without sacrificing business or public initiative (Tsygankov 2014).

The revival of a strong national identity can be summarized through the symbolic Ukraine Crisis and what it signifies for Russia and the world. The Ukraine crisis marks the vital moment when approval ratings spiked dramatically in Russia for President Putin. Moreover, it has been more than three years since the annexation of Crimea, and Putin's ratings remain high, arguing that the ratings signify a more long-term trend as opposed to a temporary burst in approvals. The majority of Russians view the annexation of Crimea as not only a "restoration of historical justice," but also an adequate response to the West. The architect of this view is Putin. Russians believe that Putin has restored Russia to its former greatness by doing so (Tsygankov 2014). Part of the appeal of a charismatic leader is to understand the society's current needs and weak points and act accordingly in a way that plays with their basic needs and emotions (Weber 2015, pp. 59–72), which Putin has managed to do. By performing its actions in Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated that it will not tolerate further Western encroachment in former Soviet states, it has shown that it is the leader of the Eurasian peninsula, it has demonstrated a warning to other nearby states, it has shown that it will resist Western sanctions, and has demonstrated that Russians share a Slavic and orthodox identity throughout the region that must be protected.

Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 saw a sharp "re-securitization of the Russian domestic space." Much of this domestic re-securitization was closely inter-linked with the increase in anti-Western rhetoric, and increasing tensions in its international relationships with the US and European states. The crisis in Ukraine sparked a clampdown on domestic security and promoted a more patriotic and traditionalist agenda for Russia. The domestic impact of the Ukraine crisis was to galvanize public support for Putin and the regime around the Crimea issue. In addition, it precipitated an even stronger securitization and restructuring of the domestic sphere to adopt an anti-Western stance through the increased pressure from the authorities on opposition voices from pro-Western groups and liberal media outlets. Media outlets that challenged the official Russian position and version of the events in Crimea came under the greatest pressure—editor of Lenta news Galina Timchenko was removed from her position in March 2014. As previously mentioned, the regime also kept protests in check around this period, with Navalny

placed under house arrest in February 2014 in relation to embezzlement charges, and banned from using the internet. Official state media in Russia presented these groups that were challenging the regime's policy in Ukraine and Crimea as acting according to their own or external interests, rather than those of the nation. Putin fears the occurrence of a Color Revolution in Russia, and through the tightening of controls, is trying to prevent the occurrence of a EuroMaiden within Russia's borders. The Kremlin sees events in Ukraine through the prism of its own domestic politics and is anxious to prevent the type of democrats-and-nationalists' alliance that brought down Yanukovych.

Russia's annexation of Crimea acted against international norms and garnered a strong reaction from the West. However, at the same time, it revealed the West's hypocrisy, because the West periodically encourages ethnic groups to gain independence from Russia such as the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the Albanian minority in Serbia to gain an independent Kosovo, and the NATO bombings in Yugoslavia. NATO claimed that the Albanian population in Kosovo were being persecuted by the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Serbian police, and Serb paramilitary forces and sought authorization from the United Nations Security Council for military action. They were opposed by China and Russia who indicated they would veto such a proposal, but NATO launched a campaign without UN authorization anyway and described as a humanitarian intervention. The FRY described the NATO campaign as an illegal war of aggression against a sovereign country that was in violation of international law because it did not have UN Security Council support. Putin framed the annexation of Crimea as a similar issue. The majority of the population living in Crimea are ethnic Russians, and Putin wanted to protect the Russian population from chaos and disorder and re-invite them to join their Russian compatriots. Putin then passed a referendum to annex it "legally" where the majority of respondents voted positively to be a part of Russia. The West responded with tough sanctions on Russia, a move that Russia portrayed to be unfair and aggressive at home. The West then struck Russia with even more sanctions as Eastern and Southern Ukraine separated from Kiev and Russia appeared to have 'invaded' the area.

NATO encroachment is the root of this issue. Due to the ongoing negotiations and discussions between the EU and Ukraine about possible ties and agreements, a division among Ukrainian people took place where the citizens of Western Ukraine demonstrated more pro-European

tendencies while the rest of the country remained more inclined towards Russia. Putin has repeatedly warned the West that post-Soviet space is within its sphere of interest and plans to keep it that way. Moreover, by arguing the case for the fragility of the Ukrainian state being a result of Western influence and lack of national unity, Putin has shown the Russian population what the dangers could be of opposing the Kremlin—in other words, regime change is destabilizing, which further legitimizes his style of rule. Moreover, deploying the military abroad has been shown, even in democratic states, to compel social and elite unity and to significantly raise the cost of dissent, which can further explain the Russian population's solidarity around the crisis (Goode and Laruelle 2014). Putin has successfully securitized the West into appearing aggressive, hypocritical, and also as a threat to Russian identity and Russia's sphere of influence. Putin frames this as destabilizing to the region. He stresses that the region has a distinct identity and distinct developmental needs. This rhetoric has earned him tremendous respect at home and even abroad among some global leaders. Previous Western attempts at "regime change" in the Middle East have proven to be unsuccessful and extremely destabilizing, such as the case with Iraq and Libya among others. Putin uses these examples as reasons not to trust the West's inclination towards "economically supporting" nations into adopting a more Western lifestyle, as it is a softer form of regime change in Putin's eyes.

Russia has adopted a civilizationist stance that defends its values both domestically and internationally. With these actions, Russia has appeared to mimic great power actions, and has developed a symbolic power for itself. This is especially important for Russians due to their history of always being a great power. They felt humiliated by the fall of the USSR and continued to be humiliated by having to abide by Western rules, but Putin has now restored Russian pride and has gained a significant amount of popular support for this reason. This civilizationist stance is very important beyond Russia and stretches to have international repercussions. In a globalized era, a power such as Russia is taking an ultra civilizationist stance and speaking of the importance of national culture and traditional values, and insinuating that the West has become a morally lax post-Christian establishment lacking traditional values and embodying a hypocritical, liberal-democratic order that is power seeking and dominating. This rhetoric resonates among many people today who are undergoing their own identity crises in their nation and are therefore more susceptible to Vladimir Putin's argument, including many Trump

supporters in the USA (Kirchick 2017). Instead, this civilizationist stance embodies the Eurasian ideology of regionalism, and takes into consideration the uniqueness of nations among different civilizations.

A multipolar world order composed of regional powers would create more stability and justice in the world in Putin's eyes. Global leaders have expressed agreement with Putin's anti-globalist stance in this regard. Social Identity Theory has proved to be a very valuable framework of analysis here as Putin has demonstrated social creativity by changing the platforms of comparisons and opening up the debate on what morality means, what hypocrisy means, what corruption means, what a functioning government means, the negative repercussions of liberal democracy and globalization, what it even means to be democratic and whether it is truly put into practice in the West, and what a stable world order looks like. Putin is waging a cultural warfare, a type of war that has no end, and will therefore remain a positive tool for approval ratings but also will remain a permanent challenge to Western values. Through media manipulation and financial manipulation, the Kremlin has continued to maneuver political thought and has undermined the Western establishment, including the EU and NATO. The goal is to empower the Western far-right, the anti-establishment left and the international business community. In an article published by *The Interpreter*, an online publication dedicated to exposing Kremlin disinformation, the journalists Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss argue that since at least 2008, Kremlin military and intelligence thinkers have been talking about information not in the familiar terms of "persuasion," "public diplomacy" or even "propaganda," but in weaponized terms, as a tool to confuse, blackmail, demoralize, subvert and paralyze (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2017).

Putin has created a symbolic personality for himself both domestically as the father of the nation but also internationally as the "Keeper of Traditional Values," as the title of this study states. Russia is remaking itself as the "leader of the anti-Western world" (Gessen 2012). Through this ideological formulation, Putin has given Russians what they have been craving since the fall of the USSR, which is a renewed strong identity. Putin stated that though his ambitions are not to achieve hegemony, he wants Russia to be a leader, as it always used to be. This identity tarnishes the West's "tolerance" and liberal values as being an excuse for immorality. Putin believes the West is revising its moral and ethical values and norms, is eroding ethnic traditions and has an overly tolerant nature that is supposed to recognize everyone's rights and thus accept

the equality of good and evil. He said it was time to resist this tolerance and diversity and that he knows there are many morally minded countries and people that support the defense of traditional values. He does not want the world to revert to a primitive and chaotic state. Putin wants to save the world from the West in other words, and his actions in Crimea were to protect Ukraine from the West. Also, at the United Nations, Russia has created a traditional values bloc where the Human Rights Council has passed a series of Russian-sponsored resolutions opposing gay rights over the past three years. Russia's allies in passing these resolutions include not only its post-Soviet neighbors but also China, Ecuador, Malaysia and more than a dozen other states. Putin's new war is not for mere territorial acquisition, it is an ideological war against the West, which many Russians support, and will continue to support (Gessen 2012).

Contemplating contemporary Russian conservatism is basically contemplating Eurasianism, which is a synthesis of Russian political history on the basis of a unique geopolitical and civilizational methodology. Putin has based his dialogue on the premise of an anti-liberal platform which criticizes Western institutions as being power-hungry and imperialist with their focus on globalism and multilateral institutions, which for Putin is a form of American global domination. Globalization to such an extreme undermines nationalism and sovereignty, both primary values that Putin abides by as well as many far-right and far-left anti-establishment parties that are gaining an increasing amount of popularity. In other words, Putin represents an opposition to the West's liberal-democratic foundation, a position that is shared among rising Western populist movements. Western institutions and values are facing important challenges today. Putin's Eurasian pivot symbolizes an end to Western domination and an encouragement of the creation of a multipolar world order, in which Russia would be a pole. This does not mean that Russia remains an imperial power committed to dominating as much of the near abroad as possible, it means that Russia does not accept the dominant liberal-democratic world order that came into full effect after the fall of the USSR as being the only viable order. The Russian identity and cultural philosophy would dominate that regional integration, and would also serve as a counterbalance to Western identity, norms and ways of life. Putin serves as a direct embodiment of why it is not the end of history (Fukuyama 2002) and how the world cannot and will not fully achieve liberal democracy.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Democracy in the world today is struggling. The problem is not unique to any particular region but seems to be affecting every region of the world. According to Freedom House, 12 out of 27 states that are partial democracies had worse average freedom scores at the end of 2013 than they did at the end of 2005. These declines took place in fairly liberal democracies such as South Korea, Taiwan, and South Africa; in less liberal democracies such as Colombia, Ukraine, Indonesia, Turkey, and Mexico; and in authoritarian regimes such as Ethiopia, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia. An important part of the story of global democratic recession has been the deepening of authoritarianism. In Russia, political opposition, dissent and civil society rarely exist outside the control of the ruling authorities (Lanskoy and Suthers 2013, pp. 74–87). In China, human-rights defenders and civil society activists have faced increasing harassment and victimization. The countries that form part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which are mostly former Communist states and autocratic states, have become more coordinated and aggressive from questions of territorial rights to state media propaganda discrediting Western institutional norms and promoting their own models and norms. State-run media is used to promote their own authoritarian regimes, create a negative image of dissenters, and promote anti-American, nationalist values (Walker and Orttung 2014, pp. 71–85). Autocrats in Africa have taken advantage of China's booming investment and the war on Islamic terrorism as a counterweight against Western pressures to democratize and practice good governance. Moreover, China's formula of rapid state-led development without democracy is often used to justify their own deepening authoritarianism. More evidence of increased authoritarianism lies with the unintended consequences of the Arab spring which have led many of the states to become even more repressive.

The democratic decline has also occurred as a result of the democratic efficacy of some of the most important examples of democracy in the world. In the USA, polarization and deadlock are tarnishing its reputation internationally. The role of nontransparent money in politics and low voter turnouts are also signs of ill health for democracies. State-led media channels in authoritarian states gladly promote the drawbacks of democracy in the USA to discredit it (Diamond 2015, pp. 141–155). In addition, the lack of a unified and democratic response from Western

world leaders in regards to the Syrian crisis also discredited the health and power of democracy worldwide. The ensuing refugee crisis also augmented xenophobic sentiment as European countries received hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees without consensus between each other on the issue. While German chancellor Angela Merkel and Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfven were welcoming of refugees, other leaders refused to accept them on their soil. Hostility grew among European nations after the Paris terrorist attacks by ISIS leading 130 dead in November 2016. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán asserted the opinion of many by saying that all the terrorists in the Paris attacks were basically migrants. The inability of the European nations to handle this crisis along with the continued economic challenges that remained after the financial crisis led many to lose faith in the European liberal project. Voices from far-right populist parties began using rhetoric such as that mainstream politics were globalist and therefore anti-patriot. American politics have also taken an anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim turn on the right especially after 14 people were killed in a terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California in 2015. Moreover, doubt stemming from both sides of the political spectrum on global democratization projects have increased due to the instability that result (Freedom House 2017).

The liberal-democratic world order is being challenged by anti-liberal constituencies. In times of physical or economic insecurity, countries tend to look more inward. History appears to be cyclical. This sentiment is gaining momentum and may be here to stay for the foreseeable future. Putin is capitalizing on this globally growing sentiment and embellishes its importance and size as a divide and conquer strategy in order for him to gain more legitimacy with his anti-liberal message. His actions within and outside Russia therefore have global significance and are gaining popularity among anti-liberal factions. Vladimir Putin, though currently the leader of an economically underperforming nation, has risen to be a powerful figure in the world; the leader of the anti-liberal constituency and the keeper of traditional values. His message will be here to stay for the foreseeable future in today's world climate.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study has analyzed Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union and demonstrated Russian dislike for Yeltsin and their overall admiration for Putin, the argument it reaches to explain these matters could

be tested over a longer period of time throughout Russian history using process-tracing. A further study could include the last 70 years of Soviet and Russian leadership to analyze which leaders had the most positive effects on the Russian population, under what circumstances and why. Such a study could confirm the findings of the present study with more variation in the independent variables such as current leader, levels of external threat, level of order and security, economic health, political liberties, global standing, centralization, identity definition and sense of self versus an external 'Other'. The hypothesis-generating conclusions of this study lie with the idea that under times of threat, which can be perpetual if "securitized" properly, the populations of a hybrid regime will prioritize nationalism and have no qualms for excessive authoritarianism or economic woes should the leader adequately represent their historical culture in a fully formed national identity that encompasses the society's particular developmental and cultural needs vis-à-vis an external 'Other' that may get in the way of freely living that identity. However, as has been demonstrated, the leader also has to provide order, security, and stability in the country to develop a solid reputation as a leader. Without the latter conditions, the population will not rile around its leader, as the leader would have not been able to provide them with basic security and order, the fundamental tenant of a social contract (Hobbes 1904).

This study's findings can also be further tested empirically by doing a cross-national study on leadership approval ratings. This study should be done on developing countries and developed countries, democracies as well as hybrid regimes at various times in history. The time matters due to the concept of "insecurity" or threats that have affected a society, be they economic, physical, or existential. The prediction is that in countries that have seen higher levels of threats across cases, or "perceived" threats, the approval ratings will be the highest among more nationally centered leaders despite economic performance and any restrictions on civil rights and political liberties. Insecurity would be measured through economic performance, levels of immigration, unemployment levels, number of terrorist attacks, crime rates and sentiment from the population about where their country is going. The basic tenant of order, safety and stability will be controlled for. Including both democracies and hybrid regimes would demonstrate if the argument is applicable across cases.

The impact of Putin's rhetoric on the liberal-democratic world order can also be tested over time in a study that measures perceptions of Putin over time as well as the level of national conservatism across nations in the coming years compared to five years ago. This study is not arguing that Vladimir Putin's leadership on anti-liberal values is making others want to mimic him, but it is arguing that he is capitalizing on the already existing identity crises that various nations of the world are experiencing and is taking leadership behind the movement of returning to conservative national values, which is resonating with many. An empirical study to discover the reasons for a global return to nationalism could be based on independent variables such as levels of threat over time, presidential rhetoric, increasing religiosity, economic performance, level of immigration, level of unemployment, democratic performance, and levels of freedom in the world.

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